

Mass Mobilization in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, 1945–1960

Alec Holcombe



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REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM, 1945-1960

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Dedicated to the Alta Bates Hospital NICU



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ABBREVIATIONS, COMMON TERMS,
AND ADMINISTRATIVE UNITS

CCP	Chinese Communist Party
DRV	Democratic Republic of Vietnam (<i>Việt Nam Dân chủ Cộng hòa</i>)
GF	General File: Democratic Republic of Vietnam documents from 1945 and 1946 captured by French and held in <i>Archives national d'outre-mer</i> , Aix-en-Provence.
HCMTT	<i>Hồ Chí Minh toàn tập</i> (The Complete Collection of Hồ Chí Minh's Writings)
ICP	Indochinese Communist Party (Đảng Cộng sản Đông Dương): The name for Vietnam's Communist Party from 1930 until 1945.
PRC	People's Republic of China
TTLT ₃	Trung Tâm lưu trữ quốc gia số 3 (National Archive Center no. 3, Hanoi)
VWP	Vietnamese Workers' Party (<i>Đảng lao động Việt Nam</i>): The name for Vietnam's Communist Party from 1951 to 1976.
VKDTT	<i>Văn kiện Đảng toàn tập</i> (The Complete Collection of Party Documents)
Village	<i>Làng</i> or <i>thôn</i>
Subdistrict	<i>Xã</i> (a collection of roughly four to eight villages). I follow Benedict Kerkvliet's avoidance of the more common translation, "commune," which could be confused with a collective farm.
District	<i>Huyện</i> : a group of several subdistricts.
Province	<i>Tỉnh</i>
Party Congress	<i>Đại hội Đảng</i> : Usually occurring once every five to eight years, it is the Communist Party's most important event. Party congresses involve the election of new Central Committee members, retirements of current members, various changes in the administrative assignments, and the establishment of a new party agenda.
Party Plenum	<i>Hội nghị Ban chấp hành trung ương Đảng</i> : A meeting of the party's Central Executive Committee that usually occurs twice a year. The plenums are numbered in sequence following the most recent Party Congress. For example, the 3rd Party Plenum means the third meeting of the Central Executive Committee since the last Party Congress.
Politburo	<i>Bộ Chính trị</i> : The party's highest office, usually containing from ten to twenty members.

Introduction

The English word “mobilize” has three Vietnamese equivalents: *huy động*, *vận động*, and *phát động*. A popular Vietnamese dictionary defines *huy động* as “to call upon the majority to work at some essential task;” *vận động* as “to propagandize, to explain, to convince others to volunteer to do some sort of work;” and *phát động* as “to push something to action.”¹ All three versions of “mobilize” reflect themes explored in this study.

When Hồ Chí Minh and other Indochinese Communist Party (ICP)² leaders seized power in August of 1945, they did so with little cash and few reliable means of generating it. During the previous four years, these revolutionaries had promoted their Vietminh front³ as an organization that would “abolish the head tax and other French and Japanese taxes.” According to party propaganda, a Vietminh government would replace these taxes with a system that was “very light and fair.”⁴ Yet, when the party leaders established the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) on September 2, Hồ concluded his inspiring *Declaration of Independence* with a line that suggested the opposite: “To guard freedom and independence, the Vietnamese people are determined to contribute all their physical and mental strength, and to sacrifice their lives and property.”⁵

The following day, September 3, Hồ chaired the first official meeting of the new DRV government and, in the spirit of the old Vietminh propaganda, requested that the government “immediately abolish” the head tax, market tax, and ferry tax as “inhumanely exploitative.”⁶ However, at the same meeting, he announced that every province should establish an Independence Fund. This would be aimed at “collecting money and goods that the people are happy to give to the government for the cause of national independence.” As a party newspaper explained, “before sacrificing our flesh and blood to preserve our freedom, we have a responsibility to sacrifice our personal wealth.”⁷

On September 7, DRV leaders released a directive clarifying that, although the head tax would be abolished, all other taxes would be “changed gradually,”

which was to say, preserved for the time being.⁸ Yet, the patchy nature of what the historian Christopher Goscha calls the DRV's "archipelago state," combined with widespread conditions of revolutionary upheaval, severely limited tax collection. That same day, DRV leaders announced that "anywhere the Vietnamese Liberation Army stays or passes through, the people must provide all possible help." According to the announcement, "the Liberation Army has permission to seize needed things such as furniture, houses, cars, etc." Owners of these commandeered articles would be supplied with "receipts" guaranteeing "full reimbursement."¹⁰ For the moment, at least, the new government could not afford to pay for these items.

The DRV's precarious financial situation compelled the party leaders to adopt a similarly practical approach to the old colonial state's salt, alcohol, and opium monopolies. Instead of disbanding these French colonial revenue generators, Hồ and his comrades decided to preserve them for the new DRV state.¹¹ In the near term, though, the ability of these monopolies to strengthen the new government's financial situation was limited. Five years of occupation by Japan, isolation from France, and, more recently, bombardment by Allied planes had crippled Vietnam's economy.

Another potential source of revenue was rice, the primary economic output of about 80 percent of Vietnam's population. However, only six months earlier, during the winter of 1945, a famine had devastated northern Vietnam. According to a study conducted by Vietnam's provincial governors in July of 1945, the total number of famine-related fatalities in the northern half of the country was 401,316.¹² Most scholars feel that the number was closer to one million. Exporting meaningful amounts of rice to raise cash would not be possible for the foreseeable future. With hunger still widespread, the Vietnamese population would need every grain of rice. And, even with the DRV state's efforts to fight the "enemy famine," an estimated eleven to twelve thousand people starved to death in northern Vietnam during the first half of 1946.¹³

Hồ and other DRV leaders probably hoped to find some financial relief through control of potentially lucrative coal mines, textile factories, and agricultural plantations. But these also proved to be of little help to the DRV government. Four years of war, the accompanying shortages in fuel and spare parts, the lack of technical expertise, and the overall atmosphere of lawlessness left most of these economic assets in an unproductive state.¹⁴ Generally, as the historian David Marr demonstrates in his remarkable account of the early DRV's "material dreams and realities," Hồ and other party leaders realized by March of 1946

that government expenses “far outweighed” revenues.¹⁵ In the words of Judy Stowe, the DRV simply had “few financial or economic resources.”¹⁶

The challenges facing the DRV grew greater still in December of 1946. At that point, the official outbreak of war with France forced DRV leaders to abandon Vietnam’s cities and relocate to the countryside. As Hồ and his comrades moved their center of operations from Hanoi to a secure region north of the capital, the French reestablished control over the country’s major roads, railroads, factories, mines, and so on. Especially damaging was France’s seizure of Vietnam’s best ports, a reality that restricted the ability of the “Hồ Chí Minh Government” (as party leaders sometimes called it) to engage in international trade.

Faced with these financial challenges, and placed in circumstances of international isolation, the DRV leaders in early 1947 relied almost completely on the countryside. As Goscha shows, the DRV regime was able to find plenty of cracks in the French wall, exploiting old trade networks with Southern China and especially with Thailand. But, despite many ingenious efforts and small successes, the DRV ultimately lacked the money needed to equip a modern army.¹⁷

Vietnam’s rural population comprised about 85 percent of the country’s eighteen million people. But the ICP’s influence in the countryside was uneven, meaning that much less than the entire rural population could be targeted for mobilization campaigns. Generally, the DRV enjoyed a “far stronger position” in the country’s northern half (about ten million people).¹⁸ Even there, though, DRV influence was hardly complete. Large areas of the Red River delta to the east of Hanoi would remain under French influence throughout the coming war. To the west and south of Hanoi, heading toward Central Vietnam, several Catholic-dominated enclaves resisted DRV influence as local priests warned that the new government was led by “godless” Communists.¹⁹

Vietnam’s party leaders built their DRV state in the context of the First Indochina War, a conflict that claimed an estimated 300,000 to 400,000 lives. Of those killed, roughly three quarters were Vietnamese soldiers and civilians.²⁰ Like the Second Indochina War (1954 to 1975), the First Indochina War defies easy categorization. Depending on the time, place, and person, the conflict could be seen as a civil war, a war for national liberation, a regional war for control over Indochina, and a proxy war of the Cold War. In 1949, the French officially established a non-communist alternative Vietnamese government called the Associated State of Vietnam. The purpose was to draw support away from the DRV, whose regions of control comprised an estimated ten million of Vietnam’s eighteen million people.²¹ The newly established State of Vietnam would eventually

mobilize an army of 200,000 soldiers to oppose the DRV forces. From 1945 until 1950, the DRV side, lacking weapons, was forced to limit the scale of military engagements with their much better armed French enemy. After 1950, the weapons gap was significantly reduced as the DRV began to receive Soviet and Chinese military aid. This enabled the party leaders to transform troops from their People's Liberation Army into seven infantry divisions. The fighting took on a more conventional and lethal character as both sides put the latest Eastern- and Western-bloc weapons to use on each other.

This study looks at the party's mobilization efforts between 1945 and 1960 in the northern half of the country. It was in this region that today's Vietnamese state was first constructed, largely as a response to the reality that the country's "entire people" were not always "determined" and "happy" to sacrifice everything for "freedom and independence." No country's people ever are. At some point, as fatigue and suffering grow, political leaders need an increasingly autocratic power to mobilize that necessary sacrifice.

Northern Vietnam: Geography, History, Culture

Since this story takes place primarily in northern Vietnam, some basic description of that region's geography, history, and culture may help the reader better understand the narrative that follows. Today, Vietnamese think of their country in both halves and thirds. When thinking in halves, the terms "North" and "South" are often associated with the twenty-year (1954–1975) division of the country into the DRV (North Vietnam) and the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam). When thinking in thirds, North and South are reduced in size to make room for a third region, the Center. This way of viewing Vietnam dates back to the reign of the emperor Minh Mạng (r. 1820–1841). From 1832 to 1834, he made South, North, and Center official administrative units of his kingdom of Đại Nam (the Great South).²² When the French colonized Đại Nam over the course of about thirty years (1858 to 1887), they adopted Minh Mạng's three-section schema as a tactic of divide and rule. Hoping to stanch the growth of Vietnamese nationalism, the French gave each region—now named Tonkin (North), Annam (Center), and Cochinchina (South)—its own set of laws and regulations to discourage Pan-Vietnamese solidarity.

Though Vietnamese patriots during the colonial period resented this division of their country, the terms "North," "Center," and "South" remain in general use today. Distanced from the stigma of colonial divide-and-rule tactics, the terms now seem to refer, in a matter-of-fact way, to Vietnam's obvious regional

differences of climate, landscape, dialect, and custom. To avoid confusion, I will use the terms “northern Vietnam” or “the North” and “southern Vietnam” and “the South” to refer to the country’s two halves. When thinking in thirds, I will use the terms “Tonkin,” “Central Vietnam,” and “Cochinchina.”

The northern half of Vietnam is roughly the size of England and Wales. Generally, its rivers originate in the mountainous regions of Laos to the west and China to the north, and flow in a southeasterly direction into the South China Sea. The largest of Vietnam’s northern rivers is the Red, which cuts diagonally across Tonkin. Most of northern Vietnam has four seasons that show significant temperature variation. In Hanoi, for example, winter temperatures can drop into the 40s; summer heatwaves can push temperatures up over 100 degrees for days on end. Closer to Central Vietnam, the variation steadily declines as the climate shifts to a two-season pattern of rainy and dry.

Scholars estimate that people began to inhabit the Red River delta in about 3,000 BCE. The origin of these early inhabitants remains a mystery. Some may have come down from the “North” (i.e., the region that now comprises the modern nation of China); others may have moved northward from more southerly regions of Southeast Asia. By around 2,000 BCE, bronze drums and farming equipment had come into use in the region. Were the people who used these items “Vietnamese”?²³ If the term has a geographical meaning, referring simply to the ancient inhabitants of the territory now comprised by the borders of the Vietnamese nation, yes. If, however, the term also carries with it a strong cultural meaning, as DRV leaders insisted, the appropriateness of labeling them “Vietnamese” is more questionable.

The scholar Keith Taylor, wary of Vietnamese Communist identity politics, has argued that a Vietnamese “cultural core” cannot be disentangled from three thousand years of Chinese cultural influence.²⁴ That influence, thought to have begun around 2,000 BCE, stemmed partly from the peaceful movement of Chinese people into the Red River delta and partly from northern Vietnam’s subsequent millennium (111 BCE to 978 CE) as the southernmost province of the various Chinese empires. As Taylor argues, attempts to connect Vietnamese culture of today with a pre-Chinese past are about “self-affirmation,” not “scholarly endeavor.”²⁵

Wet-Rice Agriculture

The bronze drums from northern Vietnam’s pre-Chinese past do, however, indicate one obvious connection between the ancient inhabitants of the Red River delta and the more modern citizens of Hồ Chí Minh’s DRV: an economic life

focused on rice farming. Though methods of irrigation had changed, the basic realities of this crop had not. For centuries, northern Vietnam's climate and soil had enabled two rice harvests a year: usually one in October (*vụ mùa*) and another in May (*vụ chiêm*).²⁶

Because of wet rice's sensitivity to temperature changes, the crop needs to grow in water, which provides an insulating effect. It is no accident, then, that the most densely populated regions in Vietnam are those flat lowland areas best suited to water management. Conversely, the most sparsely populated regions are areas to the north and west where flat rice fields would need to be carved laboriously into mountain slopes. Of the North's lowland areas, the most notable is the triangular-shaped region of the Red River delta. It fans out eastward about 140 kilometers from the inland city of Hanoi toward the coastal city of Haiphong. As the earliest known location of Vietnamese speaking peoples, the Red River delta is considered by Vietnamese to be the "cradle" of their civilization.

The ancient Vietnamese, like most farmers around the world, appreciated the relationship between land and security. Survival usually required access to land, and, whether peasants were "moral" or "rational" economists, the most appealing means of assuring that access was through owning the land one tilled.²⁷ A far less appealing means was through renting land—that is, acting as a tenant farmer. According to the scholar Christine White, "landlordism," the renting out of land to laborers, was common throughout Vietnam. French land statistics from 1938 suggest that more than 80 percent of the total farmland in Cochinchina was farmed by renters. In Central Vietnam, the figure was probably around 30 percent, and, in Tonkin, the figure was probably about 50 percent.²⁸ Peasant desire for land was a force that Communists hoped to exploit. Yet, peasant land hunger also contradicted the ideals of the DRV's party leaders. As Marxists, these revolutionaries considered private property to be the root of exploitation and dreamed of its elimination.

Most Vietnamese elites of the late colonial period appear to have recognized the problem of agricultural productivity. About 80 percent of Vietnam's population still earned their living primarily by growing and selling rice, yet the productivity of Vietnamese agriculture was one of the lowest in Asia. In 1940, Vietnam's average yield for one hectare of paddy (wet-rice field) was calculated to be 1,330 kilograms. At that time, Japan's was calculated at 3,300 kg per hectare; China's, 1,900 kg; Thailand's, 1,800 kg; Burma's, 1,700 kg; and Indonesia's, 1,500 kg.²⁹ The productivity level of Vietnam's rice fields was fundamental to the nation's health. How could an independent Vietnam hope to compete in the world if its rice fields trailed far behind those of its neighbors?

In the North, agricultural productivity was complicated by overpopulation. Writing in 1936, the great French geographer Pierre Gourou began his study of the Tonkin Delta with the line: “The Tonkin delta is a plain of limited expanse: it covers only 15,000 square kilometers; but it is extremely populous because it must nourish. . . 6,500,000 peasants.” This, Gourou explained, gave the delta an “extremely high” population density of 430 people per square kilometer. As the northern population continued to grow, the Tonkin delta region lost the ability to comfortably feed itself.³⁰ Increasingly, rice surpluses from the South were needed to make up the deficit in the North. In 1937, Cochinchina had a population of about 4,600,000 while Tonkin’s was nearly double at about 8,700,000. Yet Cochinchina’s total area of rice cultivation (2,300,000 hectares) was nearly double that of Tonkin’s (1,200,000).³¹ To Vietnamese revolutionaries, the seriousness of this economic and demographic problem in the North justified radical solutions.

Vietnamese Communist Explanations: Class and Colonialism

Most of Vietnam’s Communist Party leaders also came from elite rural families, but, through study of Marxist-Leninist theory, had adopted a “proletarian viewpoint.” To these revolutionaries, Marx’s stress on class conflict applied all too well to village life in Vietnam. Wealthy families accumulated ever greater quantities of land, dominated village politics, and exploited the labor of the poor majority. As the father of Vietnamese communism, Nguyễn Tất Thành (later known as Hồ Chí Minh), wrote in his 1927 book, *The Road to Revolution*:

The capitalists of the countryside are the landlords. They want to maintain the feudal system and hold onto the people’s land. In the countryside, all power lies in the hands of these elites. They treat the peasants like buffaloes and pigs, forcing them to stay quietly in one place to till the landlord’s fields. In their dealings with traders, the landlords want a free hand to tax merchant goods, and they demand that traders ask permission to travel through local areas [. . .]. In many ways, the landlords inhibit the growth of new trade.³²

The comment about inhibiting the “growth of new trade” added a national crime to the landlord class’s local ones against peasants. The landlords were backward, and they selfishly thwarted the development of Vietnam’s native bourgeoisie, which the nation needed to modernize and strengthen.

Vietnamese Communists also connected landlordism with colonialism. As the future party Politburo members Trường Chinh (1907–1988) and Võ Nguyên Giáp (1911–2012) argued in their 1938 study, *The Peasant Question*:

Since the French came to Indochina, land has become more and more concentrated in the hands of the great landlords, especially in the hands of priests and French colonialists.

The reason is that the French who came to Indochina brought capitalism with them, which transformed old Vietnam's entire economic system.

To Indochina, they brought capitalists who opened trading firms, constructed factories, dug mines, and built plantations. Industry and trade began to develop. On the one hand, they produced some goods here; on the other hand, they brought French goods here to sell to people in the colonies. Industrial goods . . . flooded into this country. Native producers went bankrupt because they could not compete. This especially hurt peasants, the majority of whom had produced handicraft goods to supplement their income between harvests. No longer able to sell their wares, many peasants went bankrupt and were forced to sell their land to landlords. Peasants would have to go work for the landlords and rich peasants, or work as laborers in provincial towns, toiling in factories, in mines, and on plantations.³³

In their 1938 book, Chinh and Giáp pointed out the myriad ways in which the colonial economic system was rigged against the Vietnamese. The colonial government, usually through taxes or direct intervention, “can and usually does prevent colonial goods from flowing into the French market where they could compete with French-made products.” This was done “to support industry and craftsmen in France.” Similarly, Chinh and Giáp noted how France's colonial and metropolitan governments “taxed only very lightly” raw materials sent from Indochina back to France. This was another way in which colonial economic policies promoted the development of French capitalism at the expense of Vietnam's development. In a similar vein, Chinh and Giáp described the exploitative nature of the colonial government's alcohol, salt, and opium monopolies. The French attempted to ensure that their Vietnamese subjects would have to purchase these items only from the colonial government and at prices higher than would have been the case in free-market conditions.³⁴ As the scholar Gerard Sages describes in his study of the Indochina alcohol monopoly, the French used “fines and imprisonment” to suppress native competition.³⁵

Collectivization

Nguyễn Tất Thành, Trường Chinh, Võ Nguyên Giáp, Phạm Văn Đồng (1906–2000), and other DRV leaders apparently believed that Vietnam's rural population, if pushed (or forced) to try a collectivized system, would ultimately "awaken" (*giác ngộ*) to its superiority over the old private property system. Initial peasant anger at losing their land to the state eventually would turn to gratitude as they saw the greater security and superior productive capacity of a collective farm. The Communists took it on faith that this revolutionary change was both desirable and inevitable. As Shawn McHale points out, the DRV leaders were "didactic" and "elitist" in their approach to the people. Like other educated Vietnamese, they "assumed that they had the right and the duty to tell the masses how to act and think."³⁶

Some Vietnamese doubted whether a collectivized system would work with wet-rice farming. One such person was the scholar Hoàng Văn Chí (1913–1988). He had served the DRV cause until 1954 when the party's radical land reform campaign turned him into a strong anticommunist. Chí came from an elite rural family in the Northern province of Thanh Hóa, about 160 kilometers south of Hanoi. The irrigation aspect of wet-rice farming struck Chí as something that would challenge a collectivized system. Because northern Vietnam's rice fields required the maintenance of set water levels, farmers had to construct dikes around their fields to hold water in place during the long periods of little rain. As Chí explained, "The rice grower's greatest worry, which is always with him, is the possibility of a break or hole in one of the dikes which could permit the water to flow away." Such a circumstance could mean the loss of the entire crop:

During the period of private ownership of land in North Vietnam, it was common to see the peasant farmer strolling about his land for hours on end, inspecting the dikes, while his wife and children ceaselessly hunted the small crabs which burrow into, and sometimes through, the dikes of rice field. Whenever it began to rain, he would abandon whatever task he might be engaged upon and run to his rice fields with all speed. There he would watch his dikes to ensure that they were equal to the strain of the increased weight of water, strengthening them in the weakest places, and seeing to it that his neighbor did not break them so as to steal water from his fields. So great was the peasant's solicitude for water in pre-Communist Vietnam that noisy disputes about water stealing, which frequently degenerated into

noisy scuffles, were part of daily life in villages. So essential is water for rice growing that negligence on the part of the farmer might easily result in the loss of the whole crop and the consequent ruin of his family.³⁷

Chí doubted that dike maintenance and other labor-intensive tasks of rice farming, which tended to ruthlessly punish carelessness, would receive adequate attention if responsibility for them were spread collectively.

He also questioned the potential benefits of applying Soviet-made farming machines to rice farms in the DRV. Agricultural mechanization was an important part of the party leadership's rationale for combining small, individually farmed fields into large, collective ones. How would a farm machine such as a tractor operate in the watery environment of northern Vietnam's rice fields? How could a machine replace human hands for the process of planting rice, which required placing partially grown rice seedlings delicately back into the underwater soil, one by one?³⁸ At the time of Chí's writing (1962), Japan was only just starting to develop a "rice transplanter" machine that could seed a wet-rice field.³⁹

The Nationalism of the DRV's Party Leaders

Vietnam's Communist Party leaders were militant nationalists in the broad sense of that term: they loved their country, fought with tireless courage for its independence, and yearned to restore dignity to the Vietnamese people after decades of French domination. Upon seizing power in the "August Revolution," the party fed the Vietnamese people a steady diet of inspiring nationalist propaganda, none better than that produced by Nguyễn Tất Thành himself. Thành—frequently using his constructed character, Hồ Chí Minh—assured Vietnamese from all walks of life that their lives and actions mattered. He exhorted young and old to look beyond family and village, to see that their nation, Vietnam, the "fatherland," needed them. Especially in the revolutionary atmosphere of 1945 and 1946, this nationalist message was a potent component of the DRV regime.

But Thành and his comrades were also true Leninists, and this shaped their way of using nationalism. First, they followed Lenin's two-stage revolutionary strategy for seizing power in colonized countries. During the first, "bourgeois democratic" stage of the revolution, the party would aim at mobilizing all classes for the nationalist goal of expelling the foreign power. After this initial "anti-imperialist" stage, the party would shift to the second, "socialist" stage of the revolution. At that point, the native bourgeoisie and the landowning class in

the countryside (yesterday's allies) would become the new revolutionary targets. The viability of this two-stage strategy depended on concealing long-term goals of socialist transformation behind the moderate progressive slogans of the party's Vietminh front. The upshot of this strategy was that the party, in the words of William Duiker, took power in 1945 "under false pretenses," having disguised its "true face and objectives."⁴⁰

This reality relates to the second Leninist characteristic of Vietnam's party leaders: their absolute refusal to share power with any other political organization. Having important political beliefs and goals to conceal—the elimination of private property and the market, for example—these revolutionaries could not engage in substantive policy debates or discussions with rival political parties. Thus, after taking power, Thành and his comrades kept the political discourse brutally simple. Members of the Communist-controlled Vietminh front were "patriots." Members of other political parties were "traitors." Only the Communist Party and its supporters were legitimately nationalist.

In support of their domestic mobilization efforts, the party leaders tirelessly promoted a notion of Vietnamese identity based on resistance to foreign aggression—a notion that became an axiomatic part of Western explanations for the Communist Party's remarkable military successes.⁴¹ According to this narrative, mobilizing peasants to carry out "people's war" against a foreign foe primarily required awakening in the Vietnamese people a consciousness of what 2,000 years of history had allegedly programmed them to do. In this study, I argue that, behind closed doors, Thành and other party leaders were more realistic. They probably understood that their notion of a Vietnamese essence based on resistance to foreign aggression was a selective interpretation of the past that ignored countervailing evidence (hundreds of years of peaceful existence under Chinese rule and lots of fighting between Vietnamese groups). Their definition of national essence was "prescriptive," to borrow Patricia Pelley's term.⁴² It was how Vietnamese were supposed to think and act—but could not be trusted to do. Through years of tireless indoctrination reinforced by inspiring victories over the French and then over the Americans, the party leaders made this constructed national identity "true" for millions of Vietnamese—but never true enough to obviate the need for a powerful authoritarian state.

Sources

My narrative is based on information obtained from sources that can be broken down roughly into three categories: archival, public, and human. Only a small

fraction of this material is presented in this book, which paints mostly in broad brush strokes. But all of the material contributed to my overall understanding of the period. Of the archives that I was allowed to visit, the most important was Vietnam's National Archives III, which contains records of the Communist state from 1945 to today. In those archives, I read documents from the Office of the Prime Minister, the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Agriculture, the Central Land Reform Committee, and the National Assembly. On a more limited basis, I was able to read and collect documents from two provincial archives in Vietnam (Nghê An and Hà Tĩnh) and from France's Archive National d'outre-mer in Aix en Provence.

A second source category comprises a variety of materials, mostly found in Vietnam, that are available to the broader public. First is the Vietnamese government's fifty-nine-volume *Party Documents* series and other similar official document collections sold in major bookstores and increasingly available online. Second is DRV-era pamphlets, journals, and books sold in two prominent used-book stores in Hanoi. Third is DRV-era books and newspapers held in Hanoi's National Library. Fourth is memoirs of varying reliability written by Vietnamese who lived through the early years of the DRV.⁴³ Some of these memoirs are available in Vietnam's National Library, some are available on the internet, and some were printed in the West.

A third source category is the human one comprising Vietnamese who lived through the years examined in this study (1945–1960) or who, though born after the period, have special insight into those years as a result of work or family. Since the Communist Party's adoption of *Đổi mới* (new change) in 1986, the country has become a more open place. This has made it easier for foreigners to speak with Vietnamese about past episodes that the ruling Communist Party sees as sensitive. Numerous older scholars and witnesses shared their memories and thoughts with me. In some cases, people provided me with sensitive documents that I, as a foreigner, probably would have been unable to access in the archives. To describe Vietnam as "a more open place," though, is not to say that the country has become truly open. The legacy of widespread state repression in the past and the continued fear of its more limited practice in the present still poses a challenge to research in the country.

In addition to the primary sources mentioned above, many secondary sources shaped the book's narrative. I owe a special debt to outstanding scholarship on Vietnamese Communism produced by researchers during the past twenty years.⁴⁴ In general, this scholarship has benefited from improved access to archival materials in Vietnam and from the growing chronological and emotional

distance from the intense politics of the Second Indochina War. I also owe a debt to fine works of scholarship produced by people who worked under the more challenging conditions of the Cold War era.⁴⁵ In 1950, the DRV came under heavy influence from Mao's China. Studies of that country's revolutionary process affirm the depth of Chinese Communist influence on DRV policies, especially during the 1950s.⁴⁶

This book builds especially on ideas argued by Christopher Goscha in his pathbreaking 2011 history of the First Indochina War, *Vietnam, un état né de la guerre*. Goscha points out the strong connection between DRV state building and the mobilization of men and materials for war. He also takes seriously the Marxist-Leninist ideology of the DRV's party leaders. And, perhaps most liberating for fellow scholars, he normalizes the Vietnamese people fighting on the DRV side. Goscha points out that the DRV's leaders needed extraordinary levels of coercion to make their soldiers prevail on the battlefield. This reality is crucial to understanding the strong totalitarian thrust of DRV state building. In adopting a straight chronological approach (as opposed to Goscha's thematic one), I take the reader through the gradual process of radicalization that culminated in the party's controversial land reform campaign carried out from 1953 to 1956. I place that campaign in the context of seven years of frustration felt by party leaders over the difficulties of mobilization.

This book also takes inspiration from Tuong Vu's recently published study of Vietnamese Communism, *Vietnam's Communist Revolution: The Power and Limits of Ideology* (2017). Vu is a meticulous and perceptive reader of the party's internal documents, many of which are now easily available in the Vietnamese government's *Party Documents* series. I share his belief in the value of these documents. One thing that they reveal is the strong logic of the Politburo's program of socialist transformation. Since the political legitimacy of these DRV leaders was tied to the Bolshevik model, Soviet-inspired policies had a sacred character; their correctness had to be protected from poor results. As in the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China (PRC), this protection tended to come in two forms. The first was through identifying scapegoats (usually local cadres and internal enemies). The second was through interpreting poor results as exciting signs that the time for a more radical policy had arrived. The incessant need of Vietnam's party leaders to find scapegoats appears over and over again in internal party writings and is a central theme of this book.

An important assertion of Vu's book is the consistent true belief in Marxism-Leninism held by Vietnam's party leaders up through the 1980s.⁴⁷ I believe that doubts about the economic efficacy of Communist-bloc policies may

have arisen in outwardly doctrinaire party leaders as early as the late 1940s and early 1950s. “Situation reports” (*tinb hình chung*) and other DRV-state documents in Vietnam’s National Archives 3 reveal that party leaders received little positive local feedback on their Soviet and Chinese-inspired economic policies. A powerful combination of pressures was probably sufficient, though, to ensure ideological orthodoxy in the face of countervailing evidence: the need for Soviet and Chinese support, the personal pride of the party leaders, the terrible costs of war, and the fact that most Vietnamese would not do voluntarily what the party leaders felt was necessary for victory. In the minds of Vietnam’s party leaders, the value of Soviet institutions as weapons of war and methods of regime preservation probably outweighed their apparent weaknesses as economic engines.

Finally, I build on Goscha and Vu’s handling of the DRV leader, Nguyễn Tất Thành (Hồ Chí Minh). Both scholars leave behind the old debates about whether Thành was a true communist. He was a founding member of the French Communist Party (1920). Five years later in 1925, as a Comintern agent, he founded Vietnam’s first Communist front organization, *Thanh niên* (Youth). Five years later, he oversaw the founding of Vietnam’s first official Communist Party. Around that same time, Thành also helped to establish Communist parties in Malaya and Siam. By the time he finally returned to Vietnam in 1941 after thirty years abroad, Thành was fifty-one years old. He had been in and out of the Soviet Union for much of his adult life, including a four-year stint from 1934 to 1938. Given his advanced age and experiences, it seems reasonable to conclude, as Goscha and Vu do, that his ideas about communism, the Soviet Union, and the capitalist world had reached a point of stabilization by the time he took power in August of 1945. Under that assumption, I analyze his behavior and policies.

A consistent and crucial feature of Thành’s professional life was his use of aliases. Every time he wrote something, he decided whether to sign it as “Hồ Chí Minh,” “C.B.,” “Trần Lực,” “Chiến thắng,” “Trần Dân Tiên,” “X.Y.Z.,” or one of dozens of other aliases that he sometimes used. To follow convention and simply use “Hồ Chí Minh” as Thành’s real name, labeling all other names as aliases, distorts the fact that “Hồ Chí Minh” was no less an alias than the other names. Indeed, Thành’s writings under non-Hồ Chí Minh aliases are probably more accurate reflections of his political beliefs. Thành’s mythical character, “Hồ Chí Minh,” the center of a personality cult in the DRV, was a mixture of positive traits. Some aligned with Thành’s own character (intelligent, determined, charismatic, courageous, confident, and patriotic), and some did not (simplistic, modest, accessible, and straightforward). For the sake of clarity and simplicity, I

refer to the DRV leader throughout the remainder of this text by his real name, Thành (pronounced as though written “Tine”).

Book Structure

As mentioned above, this book follows a simple chronological structure. The first two chapters cover the sixteen-month period of the Vietnamese Revolution, from August 1945 until December of 1946. These two chapters describe such things as the establishment of the Hồ Chí Minh personality cult, the party’s attack on rival Vietnamese political parties, and the subtle promotion of Marxist ideas through the DRV press. The book’s third chapter covers the DRV leadership’s move from Hanoi to the countryside and looks at some of the regime’s basic political institutions in the countryside.

The fourth and fifth chapters cover the period from 1949 to 1952. During this phase, the victory of Mao’s Communist forces in China led to the DRV’s integration into the Soviet bloc. Soon thereafter, Chinese military and political advisors arrived in the DRV along with generous supplies of Soviet weapons. Vietnam’s party leaders were able to put this material support to good use, winning a spectacular victory against the French in October of 1950 and threatening their control of Hanoi the following February. The French forces were able to recover and repulse these DRV attacks, delivering punishing blows to exposed enemy troops. The period also saw the establishment of the Associated State of Vietnam in 1949, a non-communist alternative government that the French hoped would lure Vietnamese away from the DRV regime.

The next three chapters cover the period from 1952 to 1953 and focus on the DRV’s radical new policy, the Maoist inspired “mass mobilization through rent reeducation and land reform.” In chapter six, I explore the process by which Thành decided to adopt this controversial policy. In chapter seven, I outline important elements of the mass mobilization’s basic structure. Chapter eight looks at the way in which the DRV leaders propagandized the campaign. Ultimately, I argue that virtually every oddity of the campaign’s structure and accompanying media campaign can be traced back to the Politburo’s overriding fear that mass mobilization cadres would not find enough “landlords” to make into targets of struggle.

Chapter nine, “Hunger: 1953,” is based on a roughly 500-page DRV government file containing documents that deal with the growing problem of famine in DRV-controlled areas. I use this file to scrutinize the party leadership’s claims

that most of the hardships in DRV-controlled areas stemmed from feudal landlord exploitation. Looking at local reports on the causes of famine in 1953, I show that the DRV's heavy agricultural tax, along with the disruptive conditions of war, were more important contributors to peasant hunger and hardship than alleged "feudal exploitation."

Chapters ten, eleven, and twelve cover the years 1954 and 1955. I describe the DRV's victory at Điện Biên Phủ followed by the Geneva negotiations that ended the war and partitioned the country into North and South. I look at the ways in which the DRV regime adjusted its land reform campaign to avoid being charged with violations of the Geneva Accords, which guaranteed democratic freedoms for all Vietnamese. I also consider the Geneva Accords' clause allowing Vietnamese to move freely between North and South for a period of 300 days following the end of the war. The DRV leaders viewed the departure of about 800,000 northerners to the South as a public relations disaster and directly intervened to prevent more people from leaving. In chapter twelve, I show how the party leaders, feeling more secure after the closing of the seventeenth parallel border in mid-1955, attempted to reinvigorate their land reform campaign.

The book's final two chapters cover the period from 1956 to 1960. I describe how the party leaders navigated the difficulties posed by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union's (CPSU) 20th Congress held in February of 1956. Khrushchev's shocking "secret speech" denouncing Stalin's "cult of personality" (i.e., his crimes) posed many different challenges to the DRV's party leaders. I describe how Nguyễn Tất Thành and the Politburo handled such awkward issues as Stalin's legacy, the Hồ Chí Minh cult of personality, and fallout from the regime's violent land reform campaign. The final chapter, titled "Re-Stalinization," moves quickly through the four-year period from 1957 to 1960. I show how the regime found its footing after the tumultuous events of 1956 and, under its new leader, Lê Duẩn, moved North Vietnam promptly through agricultural collectivization.

The Vietnamese Revolution, August 1945 to March 1946

From their Tân Trào base about 125 kilometers north of Hanoi in the province of Tuyên Quang, Nguyễn Tất Thành (Hồ Chí Minh) and other ICP leaders followed events in Europe. In early May of 1945, German forces in various theaters began a succession of surrenders that would bring the European war to an end. In mid-July, Stalin, Truman, and Churchill met in Potsdam, Germany to negotiate postwar arrangements. In keeping with the policy of Roosevelt, who had died on April 12, Truman insisted that Charles de Gaulle be excluded from the conference as he had been five months earlier in Yalta. This was despite the fact that de Gaulle's Free France regime had been given a share of occupation duties in Germany. During the Potsdam conference, Churchill and Truman worked out basic arrangements for how Japan's surrender would be handled in Southeast Asia, including in Vietnam.¹

Roosevelt had had warm feelings toward the non-Communist Chinese Republic and had been eager to promote the regime on the international stage. As for de Gaulle and France, he had borne a grudge against both, feeling that their contribution to the Axis defeat had been minimal and that de Gaulle's sense of entitlement to the victors' spoils had been oversized.² As for the Empire of Vietnam, the nominally independent Vietnamese regime established by the Japanese in April of 1945, it appears to have generated little attention or opinion from Washington or London. (Thành, however, appreciated the potential influence of the Empire of Vietnam's leader, Emperor Bảo Đại (1913–1997), and developed a plan for his neutralization during the August seizure of power.)³

With respect to Indochina's postwar arrangements, Truman and Churchill agreed that Great Britain would oversee the Japanese surrender in the southern half of Vietnam while Nationalist Chinese forces would do so in the northern half. Through a combination of clever maneuvering and luck, Thành would maximize the potential of this peculiar surrender arrangement, buying six

precious months for his fledgling DRV regime in northern Vietnam before the arrival of French troops.

The Seizure of Power and Six Months with the Chinese Nationalists (August 1945 to March 1946)

Through sophisticated radio equipment brought to their base by ten American agents working for the Office of Strategic Services (OSS),⁴ Thành and other ICP leaders at the Tân Trào base could follow the four events that brought the Pacific War to an end in early August: the US bombing of Hiroshima on August 6, the Soviet Union's declaration of war on Japan on August 8, the US bombing of Nagasaki on August 9, and the Soviet invasion of Manchuria that same day. On August 13, while Tokyo was still deliberating its response to these dire circumstances, ICP leaders in the North began a three-day Central Committee meeting during which Thành announced that the time to seize power had arrived.⁵

One immediate task that must have been discussed was the staging of a "National People's Congress." The congress, which Thành held at Tân Trào on August 16, involved convening "representatives" of the Vietnamese nation from North to South. An idea of Thành's since October of 1944,⁶ the National People's Congress would be held to make the seizure of power by one political party seem like a nationally sanctioned multiparty affair. The presence of the American OSS team at the party's Tân Trào base surely gave the congress additional meaning. No doubt Thành hoped that the meeting would leave a democratic impression on his American guests, whose assessments might influence U.S. government policy in favor of Thành's regime. Participants at the congress allegedly elected a People's Liberation Committee,⁷ but we can assume that the congress merely went through the ceremonial act of approving a committee already selected by Thành's leadership group during the previous three days.

The committee included Thành and three younger ICP leaders who would, with Thành, evolve into the DRV's leading foursome. The first was the thirty-nine-year-old Phạm Văn Đồng, a tall, quiet revolutionary from Central Vietnam. He would serve the regime as deputy prime minister from 1947 until 1955 and then as prime minister from 1955 until his retirement in 1987. The second was the thirty-eight-year-old Trường Chinh (Đặng Xuân Khu), whom Thành had made party general secretary in 1941. Chinh was born in the Northern province of Nam Định, about 100 kilometers south of Hanoi. He would serve as general secretary until 1956, when, I believe, Thành would orchestrate his demotion as a response to fallout from the party's land reform campaign

(1953–1956). Chinh would remain a Politburo member, though, and even enjoy a five-month twilight return to the general secretary position before retiring in late 1986. The third of the three was the thirty-four-year-old Võ Nguyên Giáp, a charismatic high school teacher with Đông in Hanoi and a frequent collaborator with Chinh in the city's lively newspaper scene of the late 1930s. He would serve as the DRV's minister of defense from 1946 until 1980.

All three came from elite rural families, studied at the best French colonial schools, recognized Thành's brilliance as a leader, and gave him their absolute loyalty. On the People's Liberation Committee, they were joined by eight other party members and four "fellow travelers," that is, non-party members who, as a result of close personal ties and ideological sympathies, supported party rule.⁸

At this time, Thành and his comrades also released an "Action Plan" that reviewed the basic tasks to be completed during the seizure of power:

Wherever we seize power:

1. Destroy the enemy's regime; government documents, seals, tax information, etc. (land registers and village registers) should be handed to the People's Committee.
2. Liquidate Vietnamese traitors.
3. Establish a people's regime; implement the Vietminh's 10 policies.
4. Establish an office of the Vietnam People's Liberation Committee. That committee should establish a new administration (Central government, People's Committees at the regional, provincial, district, etc.), take power, announce Vietnam's independence.
5. Have armed squads carry out propaganda in areas that the army does not pass through.
6. Occupy and use the enemy's propaganda organs, requisition private publishing equipment and radios.
7. Carry out a general mobilization of the masses to maintain the spirit of seizing complete independence and overcoming all difficulties.⁹

The order of the Action Plan's items suggests a top-down approach to the seizure of power. Comrades would mobilize small groups of reliable supporters to carry out a revolution from above, seizing the country's most important symbols of power (Hanoi, Saigon, and Huế first and foremost, followed by as many district capitals as possible in the provinces). In conditions of political breakdown and uncertainty, small groups of determined and well-organized revolutionaries could punch far above their weight. Having seized power from above, the ICP could then project its propaganda message downward to facilitate the "general

mobilization of the people.” At this point, the truly large-scale recruitment of people into the party’s mass organizations would begin.

The ICP took power in Hanoi on August 19, three days after the conclusion of the People’s Congress at the Tân Trào base. The takeover started at about 8:00 in the morning with a boisterous meeting in front of the Hanoi Opera House. ICP agents led members of the crowd to march on the nearby symbol of Vietnamese power in Hanoi, the Northern Viceroy’s Office (*Bắc Bộ phủ*).¹⁰ Emperor Bảo Đại’s viceroy (a king’s special representative) during the preceding period of the Japanese-backed Empire of Vietnam (from March to August of 1945) was an old acquaintance of Thành’s named Phan Kế Toại. He had been cultivated by the ICP during the summer and had surely been promised that cooperation would lead to clemency and a respectable position in a new Communist-led regime. A few days before the ICP seizure of power, Toại had resigned from the Empire of Vietnam government. Leaving his office, he had instructed secretaries there to open the doors for the party’s agents when they arrived.¹¹

Since the founding of his Vietminh front in May of 1941, Thành had doggedly pursued Allied recognition for his organization, hopefully as the exclusive representatives of the Vietnamese people. He continued to pursue this goal during the August seizure of power and beyond. To keep potential political rivals off balance, the ICP employed a policy of terror, leniency, and recruitment.¹² ICP members and their followers chased down and killed several leaders of Vietnam’s Trotskyist Party, which was too small to seize power but likely to articulate compelling criticisms of ICP policies.¹³ Party members also assassinated influential French collaborators such as leading man of letters Phạm Quỳnh. Another target was the oldest son of the powerful Central Vietnamese Ngô family, whose younger son, Ngô Đình Diệm, would become the leader of South Vietnam about a decade later. Remarkably, Thành captured Diệm as well and attempted to recruit him to work for the DRV state, despite the assassination of his older brother.¹⁴

In Hanoi, ICP agents surrounded the Nationalist Party headquarters and arrested eight of this rival party’s central committee members—yet released them shortly thereafter. Thành also sent groups of armed agents to the Chinese border to arrest Nationalist groups based there. The ICP’s strategy focused on inducing Nationalist Party defections to the Vietminh and giving defectors what appeared to be prestigious positions of authority. It was hoped that this would encourage further defections and demoralize those who remained loyal to the Nationalist Party. Later, the ICP’s policy sharpened. As a former member of this

rival party explained, “Those who cooperated with the Viet Minh were taken to Hanoi and used as tools; those who refused were shot.”¹⁵

On August 20, 1945, ICP agents in Hanoi announced the establishment of a Provisional Revolutionary Government. Thành, using the alias “Hồ Chí Minh,” served as National Chairman (*chủ tịch nước*) and as Minister of Foreign Affairs. Võ Nguyên Giáp was Minister of Internal Affairs while Phạm Văn Đồng served as the Minister of Finance. Trường Chinh, as the party general secretary, did not take an official position in the Provisional Revolutionary Government. But he was fully involved in governmental affairs. In late September, after the DRV’s official establishment, Chinh would serve with Thành and three other ICP leaders on a seven-person committee charged with drafting a constitution for the DRV.¹⁶

The following day, August 21, 1945, Thành traveled secretly into Hanoi, his first time in the city, where he took up residence at an inconspicuous house in the famous Old Quarter. Meanwhile, party leaders in Vietnam’s other major city, Saigon, initially wavered in their resolve to seize power, still wary of the Japanese forces there. Seeing the successful takeover in Hanoi, though, these comrades prepared to follow suit. Four days later (August 25), the southern Party leader, Trần Văn Giàu, organized a march on Saigon to seize power. His instrument was thousands of patriotic youths from the Empire of Vietnam’s Vanguard Youth, an organization under the leadership of a covert ICP recruit.¹⁷

Four days earlier in Huế, the emperor Bảo Đại had abdicated the throne as he had been warned to do by his secretary, another secret ICP asset. This secretary had been instructed by the party leader in Huế (Tôn Quang Phiệt) to mention the fate of French King Louis XIV as a means of winning the emperor’s compliance. Following secret instructions on which his life probably depended, Bảo Đại abdicated and traveled to Hanoi.¹⁸ There, as citizen Vĩnh Thụy, he served as “Supreme Advisor” to the DRV until the summer of 1946. What Thành valued in Bảo Đại was not advice but the broad-based image his presence gave the DRV.

Meanwhile, throughout the country, in many district capitals, small numbers of party members led groups of local recruits in takeovers. As Thành had anticipated, most local leaders were left isolated at the end of the war. They were in no position psychologically or materially to resist even small groups of aggressive revolutionaries acting with courage and a sense of purpose. Because of the strong agenda of party histories of the seizure of power, which ICP leaders named the “August Revolution,” determining the actual extent of the party’s control over the country is difficult and may never be resolved. David Marr and others have

sensibly pointed to the fact of the ICP's small size—allegedly about 5,000 members. How much control over Vietnam could such a small group have had?¹⁹

I believe that the party's immediate goal in the revolution was not to control the country but to seize control over strategic assets that other claimants to power could use to spread influence. If the party could seize power at the top, suppress rivals, propagandize a compelling message, and exude an aura of competence and staying power, people would flow into their Vietminh front and into the party itself. For the time being, inability to enforce policies in vast swaths of the country was acceptable as long as those swaths contained no organized political forces capable of mobilizing a challenge to the DRV regime.

The Complex Influence of Foreign Powers in Vietnam

Japan's three-and-a-half-year occupation of Southeast Asia tended to exacerbate existing political and ethnic divisions in the region's countries, often forcing people to choose between collaboration and resistance. Those who chose collaboration were put in a vulnerable position by Japan's ultimate defeat. For Vietnam, the complexity of the country's postwar political situation was magnified by the US decision to divide between Great Britain and Nationalist China the responsibility for overseeing the Japanese surrender. These two powers, like all foreign powers involved with Vietnam (with the exception of France), viewed the country as an ancillary piece of more important agendas elsewhere. Further complicating the situation was the fact that neither Great Britain nor Nationalist China was the ultimate authority in the region. That position belonged to the United States, which had borne the brunt of the fighting in the Pacific War and had recently detonated two atomic bombs.²⁰

For the world's two most powerful countries, the United States and the Soviet Union, Vietnam was part of the Cold War struggle for France. Because French Communists had been among the most courageous resisters of the Nazi occupation, the country's Communist Party (FCP) enjoyed a postwar surge in popularity.²¹ As a result, the FCP had a chance to win electoral victory and possibly bring the country into the Soviet bloc through parliamentary means. Since maintenance of the French Empire was a popular policy among members of both the Right and the Left in France, neither the United States nor the Soviet Union dared impose an anticolonial agenda on respective French political allies battling for control of the country.²²

For Great Britain and Nationalist China, the two powers charged with taking the Japanese surrender, Vietnam had a different meaning. The British were able to emerge from WWII with head held high, but the war had exposed their

country's material limitations and left it a second-rate power. Like France's leaders, Churchill was determined to reestablish his country's empire and the accompanying material and prestige benefits that this brought. With this British policy goal in mind, he saw the importance of supporting French and Dutch recolonization in Southeast Asia.²³

For Chiang Kai-shek, leader of the Chinese Republic, Vietnam was a neighbor whose politics mattered for a looming struggle with Mao Zedong's Communist forces. Chiang wanted a non-Communist Vietnam. Ideally, it would be an independent Vietnam led by Nationalists who were friendly with Chiang and his regime's ideology. But, if this were not viable, a French-occupied (and, therefore, non-Communist) Vietnam would suffice. In this case, Chiang would use his army's occupation of Vietnam to wrest useful political and material concessions from France. Finally, in taking the Japanese surrender in northern Vietnam, Chiang wanted his regime to look the part of a respectable world power. This meant no embarrassing troubles, such as outbreaks of violence and bloodshed, that would make the Chinese Nationalist troops in particular and the Chinese Republic in general seem incompetent.²⁴

Thành and members of his inner circle surely understood these international dynamics. With the FCP poised to seize power through electoral means, Stalin would be an irresponsible leader of the Communist bloc if he were to overtly support the DRV regime. Also, French Communists argued to Vietnamese comrades that, after seizing power in France, the FCP would liberate Vietnam.²⁵ Surrounded by anticommunist powers, the ICP needed to continue to downplay the Communist nature of their regime. Obtaining eventual support from the Soviet Union, though, required that Thành send Marxist-Leninist signals to Moscow. Thus, despite his stress on concealment, the DRV still provided perceptive observers with obvious clues about the actual political orientation of the regime's leaders.

The Arrival of Foreign Guests and Domestic Rivals

By late August 1945, it was clear that the party's assumption of Japanese non-interference in domestic Vietnamese politics had been correct. What the party leaders had been unable to predict was how Allied powers would behave when they entered Vietnam. Would the Chinese Nationalists attempt to remove the Communist DRV regime from power and replace it with a regime run by Vietnamese Nationalists, who had been supported by Chiang Kai-shek since the 1930s? The main Nationalist groups in southern China were the Vietnamese Revolutionary League (*Việt Cách*), led by an old patriot named Nguyễn Hải

Thần (1878–1951), and the Vietnamese Nationalist Party (*Việt Quốc*), led by a forty-seven-year-old revolutionary named Vũ Hồng Khanh (1898–1993).

From Thành's perspective in Hanoi during the latter days of August 1945, the fact that both of these two Nationalist leaders had yet to arrive was probably an encouraging sign. On September 1 in the Chinese city of Chongqing, the Nationalist Party leader Khanh and a handful of other members had pleaded with Chiang Kai-shek to fly a group of them into Hanoi before the arrival of the Chinese troops. In the propaganda battle for the hearts and minds of Vietnamese, every second mattered. Yet Chiang refused this reasonable request, forcing these Vietnamese Nationalists to take the slow overland route with China's Yunnan Province Army, to which he had assigned the task of occupation.²⁶ This delay played into the hands of the ICP, giving its members precious time to begin consolidating their power with little hindrance. The delay also showed Chiang's lack of commitment to helping Vietnamese Nationalists take power in Vietnam.

While these Vietnamese Nationalist Party leaders in China were lamenting their delayed return to Vietnam, Thành, Võ Nguyên Giáp, Phạm Văn Đồng, Trường Chinh, and other ICP leaders were busy organizing a dramatic "Declaration of Independence" ceremony in Hanoi's main square. During the days leading up to the ceremony, Thành met with America's OSS representative in Hanoi, Archimedes Patti, to discuss the DRV "Declaration of Independence."

As Thành had done with members of OSS Deer and Cat teams that had spent the summer at his revolutionary base north of Hanoi in Tân Trào, he played to American vanity. As though a great admirer of American democracy, he praised the US Declaration of Independence. What Thành wanted Patti to know (and to pass on to his superiors in Washington) was that the DRV independence declaration's opening lines were borrowed from that American document.²⁷ No doubt Thành hoped the move would be interpreted by Patti and Washington officials as a flattering sign of DRV reverence for the United States and its political system.

On September 12, as Chinese Nationalist troops were still making their way toward Hanoi, Britain's General James Gracey arrived in Saigon with 20,000 soldiers to oversee the Japanese surrender. In keeping with Churchill's aim to reestablish Britain's own empire, Gracey set about facilitating France's return to power. He released imprisoned French troops, provided them with arms, and authorized them to take control of important buildings in Saigon. Extremely bitter after the humiliations of WWII, these French troops rampaged through Saigon, beating random Vietnamese on the street. Ten days later, 30,000 French troops arrived in Saigon via American transport ship, a fact noted by ICP leaders

attempting to determine US government policy toward Indochina.²⁸ With British and even Japanese help, these French troops began the process of recolonization. France was, as David Marr put it, attempting to “turn back the clock” in Vietnam, hoping that the memory of WWII could be erased.²⁹

The following day, Vietnamese revolutionaries of unclear political affiliation entered Saigon’s French quarter and slaughtered about 120 French civilians, including women and children.³⁰ Another hundred French hostages were taken for a period and then killed as well. These events in the South filled Gracey’s counterpart in Hanoi, the Chinese Nationalist general Lu Han, with dread. At a meeting on September 22, 1945, he assured Thành that, as long as law and order were maintained in the North, the Chinese Nationalist forces (roughly 150,000 troops) would not disband the DRV regime in Hanoi.³¹

Meanwhile, the South erupted into a complicated anticolonial and civil war. In keeping with the ICP’s overall approach of focusing on the elimination of Vietnamese rivals, Communist forces in the South attacked the leaders of the region’s two large religious sects (an estimated 300,000 followers), the Cao Đài and the Hòa Hảo, who refused to subordinate themselves to Communist control. There was nothing comparable in the North to these religious sects, which had been supported by the Japanese and which had soon transformed themselves into potent paramilitary forces.³² A history written by a member of the Hòa Hảo estimates that about 10,000 people were killed in the struggle between the ICP’s forces and the two religious sects.³³

By October 1945, a clearer picture of the DRV’s situation was beginning to emerge. First, and most importantly, France was determined to reconquer Indochina. Paris had already used troops to reestablish control over the South, and, next door in Cambodia, had arrested the independence-minded Cambodian prime minister, Sơn Ngọc Thành. Second, the French were only prevented from clearing the DRV regime out of Hanoi by the presence of China’s Yunnan Army. For the time being, at least, the Chinese Nationalists, whose arrival in Hanoi had filled Thành with dread,³⁴ were proving to be more helpful than harmful to the DRV cause. Third, though the ICP leaders, particularly Thành and Võ Nguyên Giáp, had successfully won the hearts of some American OSS members,³⁵ the US government, like that of the Soviet Union, would not intervene to prevent a French takeover in Indochina. Both superpowers prioritized the Cold War struggle in France.

On November 11, 1945, the official organ of the ICP, *Liberation Flag*, notified the public that the Communist Party had dissolved itself, no longer acting as a part of the Vietminh.³⁶ This auto-dissolution was done in name only. In reality,

the party fought as doggedly as ever to consolidate power and to recruit new members. Was there a particular event, though, that triggered this dramatic political stunt? Scholars have yet to uncover any internal explanation. It is possible, though, that the auto-dissolution was a defensive move partly related to the imminent publication of a new Nationalist Party newspaper, whose first issue was released on November 15, four days later. This seems an unlikely trigger until one considers the obsessive attention that the ICP's two main newspapers in Hanoi paid to this single Nationalist newspaper.

Titled *Vietnam*, the newspaper was run by a cultural luminary named Khái Hưng who, during the 1930s, had been a leading editor of the country's most successful literary magazine, *These Days*. Other giants of the literary world, including Nguyễn Tường Tam and Phan Khôi, were associated with the newspaper as well.³⁷ Moreover, because *Vietnam* enjoyed Chinese protection, its editors could not be intimidated into following the ICP line. Thành and other party leaders may have feared that the Communist nature of the DRV government was likely to be a favorite topic of *Vietnam*. Perhaps these expected attacks could be countered by claiming that the ICP no longer existed, a claim that *Vietnam* dismissed in its second issue.³⁸

DRV Propaganda

Immediately upon seizing power, ICP leaders used newly acquired print media assets to project their message to the broader population. That message was, first and foremost, one of Vietnamese nationalism. During the war, France had surrendered to Germany in Europe and to Japan in Indochina. The Vietnamese were now independent and would not allow their country to be subjugated again by France. Over this electrifying nationalist background, ICP leaders propagandized three other themes. First was a nuance-free patriot-versus-traitor narrative that distinguished between those who belonged to the party's front organizations (the Vietminh, the ICP-run Democratic Party, and the various National Salvation Associations) and those who belonged to alternative political organizations. Second was the creation of the Hồ Chí Minh personality cult. And third was a hybrid political message that combined classic Western democratic ideas with thinly disguised Marxist-Leninist ones.

The Patriot-Traitor Narrative

The party leaders constructed their patriot-traitor narrative to justify suppression of other political groups, to intimidate regular people into not supporting ICP rivals, and to avoid substantive policy discussions that risked revealing long-term revolutionary intentions. An important part of the patriot-traitor narrative was creating the appearance of a multiparty system in the DRV. Party leaders therefore oversaw the establishment of two fake political parties, the aforementioned Democratic Party (established in June 1944) and the Socialist Party (established two years later in July 1946). These parties gave the ICP the appearance of being merely one part of the Vietminh front and tolerant of diverse political voices—the opposite of reality. The presence of two fake political parties in the ICP front organization helped conceal the party-versus-party nature of the ICP’s attacks on other political groups. The ICP was to act in the name of large, vague concepts such as “the people,” “the nation,” or “the fatherland” when dealing with rival political groups.

One of the early targets of ICP propaganda was the Japanese-supported Great Vietnam National Confederation (*Đại Việt Quốc gia Liên minh Hội*). This alliance of five different Nationalist parties had sought Japanese support against the French. Japan’s defeat, though, left the confederation vulnerable, and ICP leaders were quick to impose the patriot-traitor template on these rivals. The September 7, 1945 issue of the party newspaper *National Salvation* (officially the “Organ of the Vietminh Front”) included a front-page article titled “To Members of Japanese-Friendly Political Parties:”

Under the Japanese rule, many people became over-excited and thus unthinkingly joined parties that had a traitorous character.

The government clearly understands that regrettable mistake and is ready to forgive those children of the Fatherland who chose the wrong road—except the leaders, whose degree of national betrayal is clearer.

At this time, it’s not too late to repent, and the Fatherland is still hoping that those confused children will quickly return to their countrymen to serve the cause of national independence, to sacrifice for the people’s liberation.

With this doleful appeal, the Fatherland awaits you.³⁹

In the same issue of *National Salvation* was a similarly toned article titled “The Dubious Actions of the Vietnamese Revolutionary Alliance.” Having come from southern China and having been associated with the anti-Japanese

cause, the Revolutionary Alliance could not be branded as traitors for enjoying Japanese support. Therefore, the ICP's approach was to label them traitors for not having joined the Vietminh and to imply, falsely, that the Vietminh had spent the war fighting against the Japanese:

During the people's liberation struggle, working for the country's freedom, independence, and happiness, the Vietminh, during the past several years, unceasingly called upon all elements, all parties, whether inside or outside the country, who shared this goal of national independence, to participate in the United People's Front to fight against the general enemy and to build a new Vietnam. But there are still groups of people who—we don't know for what secret and deceitful reason—have not responded to that appeal. Moreover, these people make up things, instigate troubles, and make other countries suspicious of the Vietminh. In that group is the Vietnamese Revolutionary Alliance, which includes a gang of people who fled the country years ago.⁴⁰

The vague language about the Vietnamese Revolutionary Alliance's alleged tendency to "make up things" and to "instigate troubles," making foreign powers "suspicious" of the ICP's Vietminh front surely referred to efforts to point out the reality of Communist Party control.

The most common target of the ICP's patriot-traitor narrative, however, was the second of the two major Nationalist political organizations headquartered in southern China during the war, the Vietnamese Nationalist Party. Thành, Trường Chinh, and other Communist leaders appear to have viewed this party as their most dangerous rival. First, the Nationalists had a history of brave anticolonial resistance comparable to that of the Communists. Second, the ICP's two-stage revolutionary strategy meant that its propaganda largely replicated the Nationalist Party's simple message of national liberation and moderate social reform.⁴¹ Third, the Nationalists enjoyed a measure of celebrity cachet, being led by some of the country's most successful intellectuals. In a free market environment, Communist newspapers would struggle to out-compete those produced by established men of letters and Nationalist Party leaders.

What was threatening about *Vietnam's* criticisms of the DRV regime was that they nearly always contained an element of truth that could not be neatly refuted. For example, a front-page *Vietnam* article in early January discussed the Soviet Union's actions during the war, pointing out Stalin's peace agreement with Hitler in August 1939 and the subsequent Soviet invasions of Poland,

Romania, and Finland. The article also noted the Soviets' more recent invasion of Manchuria. The overall point was that Soviet Russia was still an "imperialist power" following the same policy of self-interested empire building pursued by Nicholas II and other Russian czars.⁴² For Vietnamese Communists, refuting this view would be difficult without claiming that the Soviet Union's occupations of other countries were liberations because of the regime's Marxist-Leninist ideology—a claim that *Vietnam's* editors would have been eager to debate.

Not surprisingly, one of *Vietnam's* main criticisms of the DRV regime was its liberal use of terror, especially against other political parties. In early December, the ICP leaders responded with an anonymous open letter published in their two main newspapers, *National Salvation* and *Truth*. The letter was titled, "Bitter Medicine Cures the Disease," a phrase that five years later would become the title of a book containing various hard-hitting editorials penned by Thành. Indeed, it is likely that the open letter was written by Thành himself. The main subject of discussion was *Vietnam's* contention that patriotic Vietnamese should not shoot other patriotic Vietnamese—in other words, a refutation of the ICP's traitor-patriot narrative. According to Thành and his comrades:

We regret that the seven minimal principles advanced by the Vietnamese Nationalist Party, the Vietnamese Independence Alliance, and the Vietnamese Revolutionary Alliance on December 19, 1945 did not include the fairly important principle that "patriotic organizations must together liquidate traitors."

Your policy is that [Vietnamese] should "never shoot Vietnamese" (*Vietnam* no. 10). But do you see that establishing independence requires not only shooting the foreign enemy but also traitors? The revolutionary history of every country proves the painful truth of that necessity. I would have thought that you were more than clear on that.

We don't say that all those who follow the Great Vietnam National Socialist Party, the Cao Đài, or the Hòa Hảo are traitors. Within their ranks, there are many loyal elements who, because they lacked a clear political perception, mistakenly followed [those organizations'] traitorous leaders. But there are also those elements who have betrayed the country one hundred percent and hide behind the guise of the Vietnamese Revolutionary Alliance or the Vietnam Nationalist Party to avoid the punishment of the people and the Government. You tolerate them and, moreover, accept them into your ranks. That means that you separate yourselves from the people; of course it is not anybody else who separates from you.⁴³

To diminish the prestige of political rivals and enhance the narrative of them as “traitors,” ICP attacks often used language that conveyed an image of the rival as limited and finite in character. One means of creating this effect was including the address of the Nationalist Party headquarters in the title of articles criticizing their behavior: “The Vietnamese Nationalist Party Take Action on Quan Thánh Street,”⁴⁴ “The Vietnamese Nationalist Party of Quan-Thánh Street Terrorize Mr. Trương Trung Phụng,”⁴⁵ and “A Vietnam Nationalist Party Style Protest on Quan Thánh Street.”⁴⁶ In contrast, party newspapers provided few concrete details about the DRV regime, giving it a vague ubiquity.

Personality Cult

Thành developed the Hồ Chí Minh personality cult, one of the DRV’s most important mobilization tools, immediately after the party’s seizure of power in August 1945. Construction of the cult required three things. First, Thành’s actual work and politics could not be too closely associated with the national leader, Hồ Chí Minh. Thus, Thành would use the alias “Hồ Chí Minh” only sparingly in the press, usually for messages of a more general nature. When publicly communicating ideas that revealed the extent of his leadership over the nuts-and-bolts affairs of the party and state, Thành would often use any of dozens of different aliases (Chiến thắng, X.Y.Z., C.B., Trần Lực, Trần Dân Tiên, etc.). A second requirement of the cult was concealment of the fact that its construction was an ICP policy meant to serve the specific agenda of the Communist Party. Thus, many of the cult-building articles in DRV newspapers were written under aliases not traceable to a particular party member. A third requirement was that the party have the means of suppressing alternative interpretations of Hồ Chí Minh, which meant gaining control over the media.

The character “Hồ Chí Minh” would reflect a mixture of positive traits, some of which aligned with Thành himself and some of which did not. The first category included intelligence, charisma, courage, confidence, and determination—all of which Thành possessed in abundance. The second included modesty, simplicity, and openness. These were traits that Thành and the party leaders necessarily lacked in public life because of their conspiratorial approach, their policy of liquidating political rivals, and their two-stage revolutionary strategy, which precluded full disclosure of intentions.

Politically, the character “Hồ Chí Minh” would initially stand above and apart from the interests of any political party. Like other traits in the second category, this element of the cult probably stemmed from anxiety over the extent to which the opposite was closer to Thành himself. He was, after all, the father

of Vietnamese Communism and had fought hard for the party's exclusive hold on power in the country.

The following are a few early examples of cult-building phrases from the party's main newspapers, *National Salvation* and *Truth*. The phrases must be viewed in the context of ICP "Traitor-Elimination Teams" (*Đội danh diệt trừ gian*) traveling around Hanoi, hunting down and arresting, or immediately executing, political rivals. An article in the October 9, 1945 issue of *National Salvation* described Hồ Chí Minh at a press conference: "After firm handshakes, Chairman Hồ looked over the newspaper representatives, smiled, and made a happy and simple remark that gave the conference an atmosphere of great intimacy." The article, which was signed "Citizen," may have been written by Thành himself since it explained aspects of the DRV's foreign policy, which he alone oversaw. Next to this article was an advertisement for photographs of Chairman Hồ. "Starting on October 8, 1945, the Independence Fund will set aside valuable photographs for those who admire Chairman Hồ. The price of each photograph will be 500 đồng and they will be sold every day from 3:00 to 5:00 pm."⁴⁷

The October 17, 1945 issue of *National Salvation* reflects some of the dilemmas of building the Hồ Chí Minh cult. First, the newspaper contains at least two (and probably three) articles written by Thành, showing the extent of his involvement in the regime's day-to-day propaganda grunt work. Since his first article was titled "Letter from Chairman Hồ," Thành had to use a different alias, "Victory" (*Chiến thắng*), for this second article, "Stop that Method of Making Money!" which criticized corrupt local political practices. Thành seems to have sensibly calculated that some of Hồ Chí Minh's aura would be lost if the national leader were known to have authored two articles for one newspaper issue.

Comparison of the original article in *National Salvation* and the version that appears in *The Collected Works of Hồ Chí Minh* shows that the following sentence had been removed from the original newspaper article: "During this time, when people are promoting Gold Day, Cultural Day, selling photographs of Mr. Hồ, and performing plays to collect money for this or that fund . . ."⁴⁸ The passage must have been excised from the *Collected Works* volume because of the phrase, "selling photographs of Mr. Hồ," which reveals Thành's promotion of his character, Hồ Chí Minh.

The third article in that October 17, 1945 issue was titled "Chairman Hồ Visits Quán-Sứ Pagoda and Enjoys a Vegetarian Meal." It was also written by the mysterious author, "Citizen." According to the article, "Mr. Hồ was overcome with emotion when he heard news of the vegetarian dinner celebration and decided that he must attend. Because of his surprise visit, the meal became

extremely intimate.⁴⁹ The article emphasizes the extreme efforts of women in attendance to approach and gaze at Mr. Hồ and then describes the auction of a Hồ Chí Minh photograph at the meal's end. The stress on Mr. Hồ's "intimate" relationship with regular people, which was a common theme of the personality cult, seems calculated to compensate for the distance that Thành kept between himself and the Vietnamese public. In addition to not revealing his name, he did not discuss his Comintern career, his family life, his education, his relationship with the ICP, or his goals of socialist revolution.

Similar themes of public adoration and intimacy appear in another article titled "The First Time a Locality Enjoys a Visit from Chairman Hồ to the Eight Ly Emperors Ceremony," also written by the mysterious "Citizen":

Arriving at the temple, one more time, the sound of hoorays for Chairman Hồ boomed forth. People craned their necks to look. People asked, "Is that Mr. Hồ?" Another person said: "Mr. Hồ is plain [*giản dị*] like that?" A person in the crowd said, "That's the way he is. He is always plain and simple like that. In Hanoi, when he attends formal ceremonies, he also only wears common clothes like that."⁵⁰

For the progress of the cult's construction, Thành's May 19th birthday marked a watershed moment. On that occasion, the party's official organ, *Truth*, published an article titled "Hồ Chí Minh: Son of the People." Probably written by Trường Chinh, the newspaper's editor-in-chief, the article gave a vague summary of Thành's revolutionary career without specifically mentioning "communism," the "Communist Party," "Marx," "Lenin," or the "Soviet Union." The *Truth* article brought the expression of reverence for Chairman Hồ to a new level, using for the first time a capital "N" for the Vietnamese third person pronoun "*người*" in the same way that the Bible capitalizes the pronoun "He" when referring to "God:"

Everybody feels and sees a leader in the precious older man with the simple appearance. He has the self-effacing courtesy of a sage, the deep vision of a scholar, the smile of an evangelist, the gentle heart of a mother, the passionate soul of a poet, and the determined mind of a king establishing a country. Everybody admires Him as a leader of a heroic people.⁵¹

As the DRV moved toward recognition by the Soviet bloc (which occurred in January 1951), Thành would adjust his public persona, "Hồ Chí Minh," to become a great national *and* Communist leader. However, the combination of personal traits established in the early days of the cult—intelligence,

courage, determination, simplicity, kindness, and accessibility—would remain throughout.

Politics

Thành brought to ICP strategy a greater effort to disguise party control over mass organizations and to conceal long-term goals of socialist transformation. This was in keeping with Lenin's two-stage revolutionary strategy. Nevertheless, behind this overall policy of disguise, the party leaders still promoted Communist ideas with genuine zeal. By November of 1945, as it became clear that the Chinese Nationalists were unlikely to oust the DRV regime and that the French were coming, the promotion of the Soviet Union, Stalin, and Marxist-Leninist ideas became more overt.

This approach appears in *National Salvation's* seven-part series titled “Basic Politics” (*Chính trị thường trực*), which ran over a span of four weeks.⁵² The first article was titled “Citizen” and explained the rights and responsibilities of a citizen. It contained nothing remarkable except the promise that the lives of citizens would be “completely guaranteed by the government.” The second article in the series addressed the National Assembly and promised readers that this Western democratic institution would “have the power to decide all things in the nation.” As for the crucial question of the Communist Party's role in the democratic republican regime or the role of political parties generally, there was not a word. With respect to the functioning of the National Assembly, the article explained that a People's Executive Council (*Nhân dân Chấp hành Ủy viên Hội*) would “divide up different ministries.” This institution was a direct copy of the Soviet Union's Council of People's Commissars. But nothing was said of the institution's Soviet origins.

The subtle promotion of Marxist, Soviet, and Leninist ideas and institutions continued in the third article, which set out to explain the term “people” (*dân tộc*) by rehashing Stalin's definition of an ethnic group explained in his 1913 text, “Marxism and the National Question”—but with no mention of Stalin. A fourth article in the series tackled the term “society” (*xã hội*). It explained that the “economic relationship [between people] was the base from which society develops” and that “[s]ociety's other organizational forms, such as culture, politics, law, religion, philosophy, etc. all stem from that base.” Without specifically mentioning social classes or class warfare, the article's explanation for “society” conveyed the idea that class struggle was the driver of history. The fifth article, “How to Read Political News” contained the revealing claim that “whether news is correct or incorrect depends on the political standpoint of the source.”

The sixth article, “What Is a General Election?” appears to foreshadow the National Assembly in the DRV and in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) today. According to the article, “in a new-democratic political system, the people have control over the government.” What was important about an election, the article repeatedly stressed, was the people’s “ability to select carefully (*kén chọn*) a worthy representative who knows how to satisfy the people’s will in order to work toward the greater good.” Missing from the general-election description, with its dire warnings about the need to pick worthy representatives, was the notion of elections themselves as a flexible corrective institution. The desire of incumbents to win reelection should incentivize them to satisfy their constituents, and the use of term limits should help to limit the damage caused by a poor representative. The article’s foreboding tone and its singular focus on the selection of “representatives” coheres well with how the party leaders ran the 1946 general election. As an internal party document instructed:

With respect to the upcoming election, we need to press forward with our organization of it, and every province needs to establish immediately a list of names of those who are going to run so that there is enough time to mobilize people to vote. The principle with respect to the election list: party members will comprise 1/3, people who are in the [Vietnamese Alliance] front’s mass organizations will comprise 1/3, and people outside of the front will comprise 1/3 (but in any province where the strength of the oppositional parties is strong, we can increase the number of [our own] party members). Those elements who are Communist [c.s.] or who are from the Vietnamese Alliance should not use their organizational affiliation when they run for office in order to demonstrate that they are not competing for influence or trying to strengthen a political party. Rather, [it should show] that their only goal is to save the country and that they win the election because they have the love and faith of the people.⁵³

People in the DRV would soon learn that “elections” were not democratic events but stage-managed public rituals meant primarily to disguise a party dictatorship. The important thing was stocking the National Assembly and other bourgeois democratic institutions with obedient personalities willing to play along.

*Temporary Alliance with the French:
February to March 1946*

In February 1946, Thành, the French, the Chinese Nationalists, and the Vietnamese Nationalists worked out a succession of agreements that would

ultimately result in the gradual departure of the Chinese, the arrival of 15,000 French troops in northern Vietnam, the Communist Party's liquidation of remaining Vietnamese Nationalist forces, and an invaluable nine additional months of existence for the DRV regime in Hanoi.

Again, the presence of Chiang Kai-shek's 150,000-person Yunnan Army in northern Vietnam worked to the ultimate advantage of the DRV regime. The Chinese wanted to avoid in the North a repeat of the bloody violence that had occurred in the South when French troops had arrived there in September. Therefore, the Chinese general in Hanoi informed the French that he would not allow their forces to enter the North until a Franco-Vietnamese treaty had been signed. The French must have wondered when the humiliations of WWII would end.

In mid-February 1946, the French diplomat Jean Sainteny began negotiating with Thành in Hanoi. Though desperate to sign an agreement to expedite the departure of the Chinese, Sainteny still insisted that Thành's signature would not be enough for a Franco-Vietnamese agreement. France did not consider the Vietminh front to be an adequate representation of the will of the Vietnamese people. Thus, Thành would need to convince his Nationalist counterparts, Nguyễn Hải Thần and Vũ Hồng Khanh, to sign as well.⁵⁴ Because of the major concessions given to the French in the agreement (particularly the return of French troops), Thành would benefit from having Nationalist Party rivals share responsibility. Ultimately, he was only able to secure Khanh's cooperation. On February 24, these two Vietnamese party leaders signed an agreement to form a coalition government. It would be coalition in name only, though, since these Nationalist Party members would not be given a morsel of real power in the DRV.

On February 28, as Thành and his lieutenants had expected, the Chinese and French finally signed an agreement that facilitated the departure of the Yunnan Army from northern Vietnam. The French would leave Chiang Kai-shek their old concessions in Shanghai, Hankou, Guangdong, and Guangzhou and sell him all the French-owned Yunnan railroads. The French would also amend rules and regulations in favor of Chinese in Indochina (such as a tax-free zone in the northern port city of Haiphong and the allowance of tariff-free trade in northern Vietnam). The two sides agreed that French troops would replace Chinese ones during the two weeks between March 15 and March 31.⁵⁵

The day after signing this treaty with the Chinese, French troop ships set sail from Saigon to Haiphong. They were now only days away from bringing soldiers into Hanoi and completing their reestablishment of French Indochina. But this

plan depended on Chinese cooperation. Meanwhile, to provide tangible proof of the new coalition government, Thành called a rushed first meeting of the National Assembly. Of the assembly's 403 seats, he set aside seventy for the two Nationalist political parties. Since the National Assembly had no actual power, this move was a safe political gesture to assuage the concerns of both the French and the Chinese.

On March 3, 1946, the day after the new "coalition government" had been hurriedly rubber-stamped by the National Assembly, Thành and the ICP leadership released an internal memo titled "The Current Situation and Our Policy." Dealing with the DRV's foreign relations, the memo opened by pointing out that Britain, America, and China had agreed to "yield to" France regarding the issue of Indochina, allowing the French to bring their army into northern Vietnam to take the place of the Chinese. According to Thành, who had either drafted the memo or contributed the main ideas, the goal of the British and Americans was to use the French colonialists to "surround the Soviet Union" and to prevent anti-colonial revolutions. Thus, the Americans and British had given France and Holland the task of guarding Indochina and Indonesia, which, in Thành's thinking, would "free the hands" of the Americans and British to "hinder the expansionary power of the Soviet Union."⁵⁶

The second part of the memo explained why a compromise with France, rather than immediate resistance war, was the correct policy. According to Thành, the compromise policy had "two potential dangers" and "two potential benefits," the latter outweighing the former. On the negative side, a compromise would provide the "gang of Vietnamese reactionaries" (i.e., the Vietnamese Nationalists) an opportunity to "exploit the fighting spirit of the masses to propagandize and deceive them, accusing us of being traitors, of selling the country to the West." Second, the French could use an agreement to continue increasing their forces until one day when they could renege on the treaty and "liquidate" the DRV regime in the North.

As for the two potential benefits, the memo explained that, first, a compromise would allow the party to "ruin the scheme of the Chinese Whites, the fascists, and the Vietnamese traitors and preserve our forces." Second, the policy would allow the party "to gain a little time to prepare for a new struggle that could be coordinated with the struggles of the French people and geared toward the achievement of complete independence."⁵⁷ In the coded language of the party, "coordinated with the struggles of the French people" probably meant coordinated with the policies of France's Communist Party. Here I believe that Thành was angling for eventual Soviet support by showing that his

regime could be a reasonable, cooperative, and disciplined member of the Soviet bloc. The DRV would show respect for Stalin's "Peace Movement" and for Communist-bloc interests in France by exhausting all opportunities to work with that country's Communist movement before turning to war.

To "exploit" a policy of compromise with the French, the document explained, eight things needed to happen:

1. Vigorously explain to the masses that our policy is the only one that is correct.
2. Exploit the period of compromise with France to liquidate [Vietnamese] reactionaries and the running dogs of the Chinese Whites while eliminating all provocative actions [by them] intended to separate us from the French.
3. Avoid being attacked by the French by taking extreme care during and after our signing of a treaty with France not to be provoked by the discourse of the French colonialists.
4. Make close contact with the French Communist Party to coordinate our actions with our French comrades.
5. Exploit new possibilities to expand our international propaganda—send a delegation of representatives to all meetings of the United Nations.
6. Reorganize our ranks, train cadres, and consolidate our movement.
7. Figure out ways to resolve the issue of the people's livelihood.
8. Determine a wise, clever, and correct policy with respect to the landlords, the mandarinates, the bourgeoisie, the intellectuals, etc. etc.

As Thành explained toward the end of the document, the "essential thing" was that when negotiations with the French began, the party must "not stop for a minute the task of preparing, getting ready to carry out a resistance struggle at any time and place." Additionally, it was essential that party cadres not let negotiations with the French "dampen our people's will to fight."⁵⁸

Coexistence with the French, March to December 1946

Nguyễn Tất Thành, the French diplomat Jean Sainteny, and the Nationalist Party leader Vũ Hồng Khanh signed the Franco-Vietnamese Preliminary Agreement in Hanoi on March 6, 1946. As the historian Stein Tonnesson points out, the agreement had been imposed on France by the Chinese, who feared that the arrival of French troops would lead to another burst of violence similar to what had occurred in Saigon the previous September.¹ Once again, the Chinese acted in a manner that slowed the process of French re-conquest and benefited the DRV regime.

France agreed that the DRV was a “Free State having its own government, its own parliament, its own army, and its own finances, forming a part of the Indochinese Federation and the French Union.” (The terms “Indochinese Federation” and “French Union” were new versions of the old colonial terms “French Indochina” and “French Empire.”) With respect to the issue of reuniting Vietnam’s three regions—Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina—the French agreed to hold a Vietnamese referendum at some future date. The DRV would permit 15,000 French troops to take the place of China’s 150,000 in northern Vietnam. After the first year, though, France would be required to withdraw 3,000 of its troops every year so that by 1951, none would be left in the North. The March 6 agreement also stated that a ceasefire would take place in the South to “create a favorable atmosphere necessary to the immediate opening of friendly and sincere negotiations.”²

Three days after signing the treaty, the party leaders circulated to comrades an internal memo titled “Compromise to Advance.” The memo reminded party members that diplomatic compromises should be viewed as temporary strategic moves. “Complete independence” under the party’s leadership remained the only acceptable long-term goal. For the time being, the memo instructed, the party would need to adjust its slogans to accentuate the notion of a France

divided between two forces, a “reactionary” one that was pro-colonialist and a “new democratic” one that was potentially pro-Vietnamese-independence. “New democracy” was the party’s code word for “communist” or under Communist Party rule, so we can assume that a “new democratic” France meant a France led by its Communist Party. Thus, the slogan “Resist the French Colonialist Aggressors” was to be changed to “Equal Alliance with New France” or to “The French and Vietnamese Peoples Unite against Reactionary France.” Another unstated benefit of this policy was that it aligned with Moscow’s continued hopes that France might be brought into the Soviet bloc through electoral means.³

Over the next nine months until the outbreak of open war in December of 1946, Thành would push the potential of an alliance with “New France” to the limit. He and his lieutenants did this for domestic and diplomatic reasons. On the domestic front, the DRV regime probably paid some price in popularity for their conciliatory approach toward France. However, from the perspective of the regime’s legitimacy in the eyes of Vietnamese, the benefit of simply existing in Hanoi as an independent government surely outweighed the costs associated with temporary compromise. Moreover, a temporary alliance with France facilitated the departure of the Chinese Nationalist troops who had provided the party’s Nationalist rivals with a measure of protection since the August 1945 seizure of power. If all-out war with France could be delayed for a few months, the party could concentrate its still-limited human and material resources on the thousands of Nationalist troops who remained a presence in northern Vietnam.

Reorganizing the Public Security Forces

While he was beginning to negotiate a deal with the French in February 1946, Thành decided to reorganize his police forces into one centralized agency. This may have been done in anticipation of conditions that would permit a more vigorous surge of repression against domestic rivals. Therefore, as the historian Francois Guillemot explains, the former Traitor Elimination Honor Guards (*Đội danh dự trừ gian*), the National Salvation Police (*Cảnh sát cứu quốc*), and the Special Investigative Units (*đội trình sát*) were put into one organization called the Vietnamese Public Security Bureau (*Việt Nam Công an Vụ*).⁴ The head of this large new police apparatus was an ICP member named Lê Giản (1911–2003). As Giản recounted in his memoir, “Uncle (Thành), Võ Nguyên Giáp, and Central Committee members cared a great deal about the Public Security apparatus.”⁵

The March 6 agreement was supposed to have created in the DRV a “coalition government” that gave some power to the Nationalists. To disguise the Communist Party’s control over the police and to reflect the external appearance of a coalition, Thành had Giản step aside as director of the Public Security Bureau so that a non-Communist figurehead could be inserted at the top as the official director. All power continued to reside in Giản’s hands, despite his demotion to “vice-director.” As Giản recounted years later, Thành and other Party leaders called this strategy “painting the head white.”⁶

Though the Nationalist Party leader, Vũ Hồng Khanh, had been cajoled into signing the March 6 Franco-Vietnamese Preliminary agreement, Thành still expected trouble from many Nationalists who rejected any compromise with the French. In late March, the DRV issued a decree permitting local Administrative Committees (the regime’s primary political structure in the villages) to arrest any person who disturbed the peace.⁷ The aforementioned party directive, “Compromise to Advance,” had cautioned comrades to “resist the actions of the reactionary political parties” who try to “cut in front of” the party leadership and sow divisions between the Hồ Chí Minh government, the French, and the Chinese so as to “annul” somehow the Franco-Vietnamese Preliminary agreement:

With respect to the faction that is friendly with the Chinese, we need to take advantage of the moment when they are confused, when they feel that they are about to be abandoned by the Chinese, and when they waver in their political views after the signing of the Franco-Vietnamese agreement, to divide their ranks. We need to carefully take on board the honest (*trung thực*) elements [of their party] and lure them over to our side. We need to show the masses that the leaders of the Vietnam Nationalist Party are nothing but a gang of cowardly opportunists because they only know how to obey orders from foreigners and put their own interests above those of the people.⁸

The party leaders projected onto their Nationalist-Party rivals those characteristics and criticisms that they (the ICP leaders) probably feared might be leveled against themselves. A later order released on April 14, 1946 spoke of organizing May Day celebrations. Aware that their political tune had suddenly changed in a way that could be characterized as opportunistic, the DRV leaders cautioned rank-and-file party members: “We must prevent the Trotskyists or other reactionary groups from using May Day to protest in a sectarian manner or from

secretly entering a crowd of our own protesters and shouting past slogans of ours that are not appropriate at this time.”⁹

Negotiations

When Thành, Sainteny, and Vũ Hồng Khanh signed the March 6 preliminary agreement, 21,000 French troops were already five days into a journey from Saigon to Haiphong. These soldiers arrived in Hanoi on March 18, beginning what would be a nine-month period of DRV-French coexistence in northern Vietnam.¹⁰ Six days later, Thành, along with the Nationalist Party cultural luminary Nguyễn Tường Tam, met with the French admiral and arch-colonialist Thierry d’Argenlieu. During the meeting, Thành was able to convince his French counterpart to support a proposal for further high-level discussions.¹¹ In the first half of April, a “friendship mission” of ten DRV National Assembly members was to travel to France to meet with members of the French National Assembly. At roughly the same time, a “preparatory conference” was to be held in the highland town of Dalat, roughly 300 kilometers to the northeast of Saigon. That conference would involve twelve representatives from France and twelve from the DRV. In Dalat, the two sides would attempt to lay the diplomatic groundwork for a more “definitive” conference to be held in Paris in late May.

Thành must have been ecstatic. First, D’Argenlieu’s agreement to talks meant that the French would be unlikely to oust the DRV regime from Hanoi in the immediate future. The Paris location for the second round of talks would add significant time to the negotiating process, likely giving the DRV at least a few extra months in Hanoi. Second, Thành himself could travel to France for the negotiations. Even a meager amount of red carpet rolled out to him by the French government would help to solidify his image as national leader. Thành could be sure that the DRV’s main newspapers, all under the control of trusted party editors, would exploit to the maximum the propaganda potential of his visit to France. Third, the trip would give Thành a chance to gauge France’s mood, to meet quietly with members of the French Left, and to assess their political prospects.

Why did the French agree to such a plan, which, on the outside at least, seems to have been so beneficial to the main obstacle blocking re-colonization, the DRV regime? Three factors may have played a role in their thinking. First, in negotiating with the French in Hanoi and especially in Haiphong, Thành had taken a great and brilliant risk, at times placing himself completely at their

mercy. As Sainteny later recalled, this was a “splendid vote of confidence” in the honor and word of the French.¹² Thành’s trust may have made it more difficult for the French to suddenly use violent means to expel him and his regime from Hanoi.

A second factor was the moderate, accommodating image of himself that Thành conveyed to French diplomats. For the most part, the French bought this contrived image and came to believe in a narrative promoted by Thành that positioned him as a French-friendly moderate struggling to hold back hotheaded Vietnamese comrades. As a result, some French leaders thought that by extracting Thành from Hanoi and the influence of his alleged radical lieutenants, he might be convinced to cooperate with France in its reassertion of control in Indochina.¹³ That was an important miscalculation.

A third factor, which was probably the most important, was the lingering presence of the Chinese Nationalist Army. Its generals would adopt a go-slow approach to leaving northern Vietnam. Not until September 1946—six months after the signing of the Preliminary Accord—would the last Chinese units depart from Haiphong. Writes Tonnesson, “As long as at least some Chinese occupation troops were present in northern Indochina, an outbreak of open hostilities between France and Vietnam risked having international repercussions.”¹⁴

The Dalat Conference: April 22 to May 11

In assembling the twelve-person negotiating group for the three-week preparatory conference at Dalat, Thành and his lieutenants again selected people who would make the DRV government appear coalitional in character. Applying his “paint-the-top-white” strategy, Thành called on the services of the aforementioned Nationalist Party leader Nguyễn Tường Tam, installing him as the delegation’s official chairman. After the March 6 agreement, Tam had been DRV foreign minister, but exercised no power in this position. All involved in the Dalat negotiations—both the Vietnamese and the French—seem to have understood that the real power of the DRV delegation lay with its vice-chairman, Võ Nguyên Giáp.¹⁵

In recent years, Tonnesson has stressed the fluidity of DRV-France relations in 1946, arguing that war between them was not inevitable. If only cooler heads had prevailed, a peaceful accommodation could have been achieved, avoiding thirty years of bloody warfare.¹⁶ The issue of war’s inevitability touches on the question of whether Thành negotiated in good faith with the French. Did he believe that an acceptable peaceful resolution was possible? Or were his long, drawn-out negotiations mostly a delaying tactic meant to give his regime more

time to consolidate its position, to liquidate rivals, and to prepare for war against the French? I believe that the second interpretation is the more likely.

Were he pressed to defend himself on moral grounds, Thành surely would have pointed to the eighty years of colonial rule, the many ruses employed by the French in their colonial project, and the countless humiliations that both the ruses and the project had brought upon the Vietnamese people. To Thành and many other patriots, the French probably had long lost a moral leg to stand on, especially as they sought to recolonize Vietnam—in other words, they deserved every trick in the book.

In my view, the three-week Dalat Conference, held from April 22 to May 11, removed all reasonable doubt of France's intention to re-colonize Vietnam. Several things from the conference impressed upon the Vietnamese delegation France's determination to follow this course. First, the French negotiators initially refused to discuss one of the Vietnamese delegation's most pressing issues, France's intention to create an "Autonomous Cochinchinese Republic." The DRV regime insisted on the unity of Vietnam, which included Cochinchina, and insisted that the people of the South carry out a referendum on the issue of unification with the rest of the country. The French reneged on that promise.¹⁷

Just as revealing were the Dalat Conference's small-group discussions. These were divided into four categories: politics, economics, defense, and culture. In the field of politics, the French would not allow Vietnam to conduct its own foreign affairs. In the field of economics, the DRV state would not be allowed to issue its own currency. In the field of military affairs, France was willing to discuss the stationing of DRV troops above the sixteenth parallel but rejected the possibility of stationing any below it. With respect to culture, France would not allow the Vietnamese language to replace French as the primary language of instruction in Vietnamese universities. And finally, the French delegation insisted that it had a duty to protect the ethnic minority peoples in Vietnam, helping them to form their own countries protected by France—a rejection of the territorial unity of Vietnam.¹⁸

After three weeks of difficult negotiations, the Dalat Preparatory Conference came to a dramatic ending. Continued French refusal to allow a referendum in the South on the question of national unification brought about a moment of tense silence. An older member of the Vietnamese delegation, Hồ Hữu Tường, stood up with tears of anger and frustration in his eyes and walked out of the room. A few moments later, Võ Nguyên Giáp followed suit. As a Vietnamese participant described it, "[Giáp] [s]uddenly stood up, grabbed his briefcase, and stormed out the door before the astonished eyes of all delegation members,

giving the door a thunderous slam behind him.” Remembering that moment, this participant wrote that Giáp’s door slam had filled him with a sense of foreboding—it was the “first thunderclap in a storm that would draw the Vietnamese people into a forced war for the independence and unity of the Fatherland.”¹⁹

After the conference, Giáp returned to Hanoi and to his duties as Minister of the Interior. With Thành, he no doubt discussed at length his three-week experience negotiating with the French. They had given ground on no important DRV principles, showing a determination to re-colonize Vietnam and, by implication, dispose of the Hồ Chí Minh Government. Yet, every day that the DRV could continue to exist in Hanoi helped to convince a few more Vietnamese that the regime was a reality. Thus, the outbreak of war was to be delayed as long as safely possible.

The inevitability of war was also signaled by a major referendum held in France on May 5, six days before the end of the Dalat Conference. The referendum put to the French people the question of a new constitution that would abandon France’s bicameral system through abolition of the Senate. All political power would fall into the hands of the National Assembly. Conservative opponents of the new constitution, which had been proposed by the Communists and Socialists, cautioned the French people that such a unicameral system would provide a means for the radical Left to dominate France’s political system and possibly bring the country into the Soviet bloc.²⁰

Nearly eighty percent of France’s voting population participated in the referendum, which saw the proposed constitution’s rejection by a margin of 52% to 48%.²¹ The failed referendum reduced the possibility of a complete seizure of power by French Communists. Despite this important setback, the FCP remained the country’s most popular political party, meaning that the dream of a Communist takeover was still intact, if somewhat damaged. Since the French public had rejected the proposed unicameral constitution, the National Assembly was dissolved, and new elections were called for June 2, 1946—just when Thành and the DRV delegation were supposed to arrive in France. This “provisional” National Assembly would be charged with drafting yet another constitution, whose ratification or rejection would be followed by yet another legislative election.²²

Consolidating Power

During the summer of 1946, while Thành and Phạm Văn Đồng were overseas negotiating in Paris, Võ Nguyên Giáp and Trường Chinh oversaw three tasks

that helped the DRV consolidate power. One was the purging of the party's apparatus in the South. A second was the establishment of three additional front organizations: The United Citizens of Vietnam Association, the Socialist Party, and even a new Progressive Nationalist Party. A third task, made possible by the ongoing departure of Chinese Nationalist troops, was the more vigorous repression of Vietnam's Nationalist Party members.

*The Party Founds a New Front Organization:
The United Citizens of Vietnam Association*

Through his negotiations with the French diplomat Jean Sainteny and through his reading of the international press, Thành probably realized that his Vietminh front was now viewed by many people as Communist-led. Therefore, it no longer served its purpose as a front organization that would give the DRV the appearance of political plurality. This may have been the impetus behind Thành's establishment of a new front organization called the United Citizens of Vietnam Association (*Hội liên hiệp quốc dân Việt Nam*). This new organization was officially announced on May 29, 1946, the day before Thành's departure for France. As he tended to do, Thành left the explanations and theoretical justifications to Trường Chinh. In the June 1 issue of party newspaper *Truth*, the party general secretary explained the new front organization:

First and foremost, the United Peoples of Vietnam Association is not a united front that belongs specifically to patriotic parties, like the Vietminh, for example. [Rather,] it is a united bloc that combines parties, factions, and segments of the population who are not affiliated with a party or faction but who have one common goal: the betterment of the nation. It is a unified front of the entire people. Moreover, the United Peoples of Vietnam Association not only has as its goal the freedom and liberation of the Vietnamese people, it also fights for the cause of the wholeness of Vietnam, and for Vietnam to quickly attain the status of a prosperous and powerful country.²³

Chinh's appeal for the new front organization mentioned the difficulties facing the country, namely the South's having been "swallowed" by the French and the "Democratic Republic regime" having come under attack from both domestic and foreign "reactionaries." Chinh was careful to insinuate that the Communist Party was an open-minded, welcoming, and generous political actor in the country. Its adversaries were the ones motivated by party politics and therefore unwilling to unite. He explained that the "entire people" had to be "molded

into one unified bloc.” According to Chinh, “All class prejudice, all interparty competition, and all religious and racial envy must be cleared from the road of the Vietnamese people’s development.” With the establishment of United Vietnam, argued Chinh, the Vietnamese people were now united, “not only in the government but out in the masses of people.” The nation’s citizens “had seen the form of broad-based people’s unity.” Chinh asked rhetorically in his new *Truth* newspaper article: “Do the backgrounds of the founders the United Citizens of Vietnam Association not show clearly its broad-based and unified form?”

As for the propaganda value of the United Vietnam Association, Chinh explained:

The establishment of the United Citizens of Vietnam Association is an appropriate response to the French reactionaries who are looking for every means of dividing our compatriots in the South and North, our compatriots who are religious and those who are not, the Vietnamese who are wealthy and the Vietnamese who are poor, the ethnic Kinh citizens and the Highland minority citizens. The establishment of this Association is also an appropriate response to the various reactionary Vietnamese traitors who are resigned to serving as the running dogs of foreigners, to opposing the rights of all the people and to relying on the strength of people who want to create an “autonomous local administration.”

Chinh’s explanation made no mention of communism as a potentially divisive dynamic in Vietnamese political life. This was *the* key issue that could not be discussed openly, even in the party’s official organ. Chinh left his readers with the following advice on the United Vietnam association: “Do not be suspicious; do not be bitter. We must follow the model of Chairman Hồ and be lenient and generous of spirit. Do not unify here and split apart there. We must follow the model of Chairman Hồ and be sincere and thoughtful.”²⁴

Attacking the Nationalists: Summer of 1946

While Thành and Phạm Văn Đồng were away in France, Chinh and Giáp took over the leadership of the DRV. In June, these two oversaw another reorganization of the DRV’s Public Security apparatus, creating a special new agency called the Hanoi Public Security Force. As Francois Guillemot explains, this organization appears to have been created specifically for a renewed effort against Vietnamese Nationalist Party members in the city. The Hanoi Public Security

Force would soon play a leading role in one of this campaign's most well-known episodes.²⁵

In June of 1946, despite the continued presence of some Chinese Nationalist troops, the party had begun to ramp-up suppression of various Vietnamese Nationalist forces spread around the North. On May 15, DRV troops struck against Nationalist forces to the east of Hanoi along the highway to Haiphong. On May 22, the DRV troops had attacked again and then pulled back, giving way to Hanoi-bound French troops, who promptly took up the attack against the Nationalists. By August, these Nationalist forces would all be driven across the border into Southern China.

According to Guillemot, Giáp was "obsessed by the clandestine actions of non-communist revolutionaries."²⁶ Apparently, he feared that Nationalist Party members would attempt to provoke France into war as a means of eliminating the DRV regime in Hanoi. On June 21, Giáp's forces launched an attack on northwestern provinces, through which passed the railroad from Hanoi to the Chinese border. This region, particularly the province of Phú Thọ, had been the stronghold of the Nationalist groups since November of 1945. Giáp sent a force of 3,000 troops against roughly 350 Nationalist soldiers. After nine days of fighting, the Nationalist forces were dislodged from Phú Thọ and forced to retreat northwestward to the border province of Lào Cai.²⁷

At the end of June, Giáp met with a French military leader in Hanoi to ask his thoughts about a DRV operation against Vietnamese Nationalists in the city. Having been assured that the French had no objection to such an action, Giáp had a free hand. In the minds of the party leaders, a major push of repression needed a good story behind it to serve as justification. As Guillemot explains, the justification had two components. The first was the notion that the Nationalists were preparing a terrorist action against the French and the DRV regime. The second was the notion that the Nationalists, as a criminal and sadistic group, posed a great danger to apolitical Vietnamese citizens. Giáp wanted one sensational episode to serve a propaganda purpose as a symbol of Nationalist Party evil.

On July 11, 1946, he held a lengthy meeting with leaders of the party's police apparatus to discuss a purported Nationalist attack planned for July 14. At the time, he had only "slim proof" that such an attack was in the works. However, during that meeting, a new report suddenly arrived from a spy at the Nationalist Party headquarters on 132 DuVigneau Street (Bùi Thị Xuân) showing plans to print appeals calling for the overthrow of the DRV government. At 4:30 a.m. the following day (July 12), Giáp's police forces raided the house, allegedly seized

posters calling for the DRV regime's overthrow, and arrested about twenty Nationalist Party members. Over the next two days, the DRV security apparatus continued its operations in Hanoi, attacking various other houses known to have groups of Nationalists.²⁸

The Ôn Như Hầu Affair: July 14, 1946

The most important of these raids in Hanoi occurred at a modern-style villa on 7 Ôn Như Hầu Street (the neighborhood of Xóm Hạ Hối today). The "Ôn Như Hầu Affair," as it was labeled by party historians, foreshadowed decades of similar Soviet tactics employed by the party's security forces against perceived political threats. Giáp decided that the villa on Ôn Như Hầu Street would be set up as a house of debauchery and death. To create such a scene, he needed dead bodies that could be "discovered" during the raid and presented to the public as evidence of Nationalist Party atrocities. To this end, Giáp sent police agents to the local hospital in the middle of the night to seize several cadavers. These were brought to the house at Ôn Như Hầu Street and arranged for propaganda photographs as part of the overall raid. Giáp's narrative turned the Nationalist Party house into a sadistic torture chamber whose victims were buried in the backyard.²⁹

An "Ôn Như Hầu Affair" article published in the party's police newspaper, *New Public Security*, begins with the lines, "How shocked people are when they return from the countryside and, hearing news of 'Ôn Như Hầu,' come to view the special house."³⁰ The article creates suspense and the feeling of discovery by proceeding from the outside of the villa to the inside, revealing successively more gruesome details. The first section, titled "Offices in an Execution Nest," assures the reader that 7 Ôn Như Hầu looks "like a normal house." The first floor contains a dining room and bedrooms. However, on the second floor, "we find a secret meeting room, a torture room with tangles of electrical cords, a colored tile floor, brick walls, an 'experiment' room, and a confinement room."

The article then begins to reveal the alleged nefarious activities in the house, following the trope of innocent and unsuspecting people gradually discovering the true horror behind faintly suspicious behavior. A section titled "Shadows in the Dark Night" describes the experience of neighbors who had heard "sudden bursts of singing" late at night. We learn that this "abnormal" singing had been done to cover up the screams of people being tortured and executed. Fearful neighbors also "worried when they saw shadows 'bent over' and heard the 'sound of shovels digging dirt.'" In the *New Public Security* article, the police raid on 7 Ôn Như Hầu had helped these neighbors to finally understand that these

strange digging noises had been Nationalist Party members burying their torture victims. The article rises to a climax with lurid descriptions of the exhumed bodies followed by a concluding message:

There is not a single person who, with revulsion and pain, does not see clearly that that fake political party only hid behind wonderful slogans in order to steal from and kill people, to assault people before exploiting them. They were a lazy group of buffalo heads and horse eyes, with no jobs, who gathered together to find a means of existing outside the law.³¹

Meanwhile, the attacks on Nationalist forces in the countryside continued. In July, Giáp sent forces to the northeast of Hanoi, driving Nationalist soldiers northeastward to the border town of Lạng Sơn. A few weeks later in August, DRV forces attacked again. By September, the last remnants of these Nationalist soldiers had retreated across the Chinese border. Also in July, Giáp launched an attack to the southeast of Hanoi toward the South China Sea, striking Nationalist groups in the provinces of Hưng Yên and Thái Bình. In the former, DRV forces captured and summarily executed about 300 Nationalist troops. That same month, DRV forces mopped up pockets of Nationalist troops based in Central Vietnam.³²

As Guillemot points out, the Nationalist forces suffered from crucial weaknesses. One was a lack of effective cooperation and unified command among different groups. Sometimes, efforts to join forces failed with disastrous results. A second problem was the internal dissention caused by the Communist Party's "carrot-and-stick" policy. In one case, the defection of a Nationalist leader led to the capture and imprisonment of around 500 troops. A third weakness in some areas was the loss of logistical and material support suffered when the Chinese Nationalist army withdrew. A fourth issue for the nationalists was an arms disadvantage relative to their Communist rivals, whose seizure of power had afforded them many opportunities to capture weapons and ammunition.³³

A final Nationalist disadvantage was the occasional French support that the DRV enjoyed. For the French saw the Nationalists as dangerous anti-Western zealots and were happy to see them hunted down by the DRV. As one French general explained later in reference to a combined DRV-French operation against Nationalists to the northeast of Hanoi: "Of course, it was not a matter of going alone or against the Vietnamese government, but with it. That would be an excellent occasion to obtain a Franco-Vietnamese military cooperation that linked the fate of the Vietnamese government more closely to us."³⁴

The Case of Hoàng Cán

One of the most hotly contested regions in the Communist-versus-Nationalist struggle was the provincial capital of Phú Thọ province, Việt Trì. About 80 kilometers northwest of Hanoi, Việt Trì was one of the major stops on the railroad from Hanoi to the Chinese city of Kunming. The French archives contain an extensive DRV file on a Việt Trì resident named Hoàng Cán, whose case captures well the complicated political environment of the time.³⁵

Forty-one years old, Cán was a well-educated former official who had served the colonial state for eighteen years as a cartographer and land specialist. Cán's work involved creating accurate maps that reflected administrative and property boundaries. While his wife, father, and four children were based in Việt Trì, Cán worked for periods in Cambodia, Sơn Tây province (west of Hanoi), and most recently in Hưng Yên province (southeast of Hanoi).

When the Communists seized power in August of 1945, their agents in Hưng Yên quickly arrested Cán and five other government officials. As important colonial officials, all probably resided in the provincial capital. ICP agents held Cán prisoner until September 7, 1945. After being released, he immediately traveled by boat up the Red River, past Hanoi, and back to his family home in Việt Trì. There, as he claimed in a statement to the DRV police, he decided to stop his government work and spend time cleaning and repairing his house, which had recently been damaged by flooding.

Soon after his return to Việt Trì, local revolutionaries attempted to recruit Cán to serve as a "commissar" (*chính trị viên*) for the district. This was an especially important position because the district included the provincial capital, Việt Trì. Cán must have been amazed at how quickly he had shifted from target of repression to target of recruitment. In his deposition to the police, he claimed that he "did not dare accept" this commissar position because he was "unfamiliar with the job and afraid I would not be able to do it." He asked to be given the same commissar position at the subdistrict level (a subdistrict was a unit of four to eight neighboring villages) to gain some experience. Was this the reason that Cán had refused the district-level commissar position? Uncertainty about the permanence of the DRV regime may have factored into his thinking. Committing himself to an important leadership position in the DRV could lead to trouble down the road if the regime were deposed by the French.

Cán's life became more complicated in November 1945. As he recounted in his deposition:

At the beginning of November 1945, the Vietnamese Nationalist Party came to Việt Trì. The district [Administrative] Committee and my village Committee both attempted to stay away from the Nationalists. My village had a group of people who denounced and exposed us [as Vietminh supporters]. I was arrested [by the Nationalists] and had my house searched. Luckily for me, Mr. Phung, who was a follower of the Chinese Army, returned to Việt Trì and secured my release. Having avoided being arrested again, I suffered from the presence of the Chinese Army, who often bothered my household and me until this past February.

According to Cấn's police statement, he applied for work at the cartography office in Hanoi two times, but with no luck. Then, after the "union" (*đoàn kết*) occurred (presumably the March 6 agreement between the DRV, the Nationalists, and the French), a "Việt Trì Economic Office" was formed. A friend of Cấn's recommended that he join the new office, assuring him that it was an official "Government office." However, it appears that the office was associated with the Vietnamese Nationalist Party, who still controlled Việt Trì. Here the Communist Party's two-week imprisonment of Cấn probably paid dividends, making him reluctant to join this Nationalist organization. To his Việt Trì Economic Office recruiters, he claimed that he must see an "official edict" from the DRV in Hanoi before joining. None came, so it appears that Cấn continued to lie low at his home.

At the end of February, the Nationalist Party army, having heard of Cấn's expertise with maps, came and took from him a map of Việt Trì and demanded that he print more copies for their use. Lacking the necessary materials, Cấn could not fulfill this demand. The Nationalists also "forced" Cấn's village to establish a youth group. In March, he could no longer avoid being brought into the competition between the two political parties. According to his police statement, he had conferred with two "Vietminh Party members" named Sinh and Chuộn about what to do. The three decided to encourage local youth to remain neutral and to engage in local mutual aid activities rather than in politics. Cấn claimed that, soon thereafter, he was housebound for a month with a case of diarrhea.

Concluding his case, Cấn insisted on the "truth" of his account. The accusations against him "only stemmed from somebody's hatred of me." Cấn assured his readers that the "physical and mental hardships of prison have made me thoroughly repent." He also promised that, if pardoned and allowed to work for the

government's cartography office, he would focus only on that and not "go down other roads."

What were the "accusations" against him? Cản's appeal written from prison makes no direct mention of these things, but his file contains a brief transcript of his police interview with the Head of the Phú Thọ Public Security Department and the Head of the Political Board. He had been arrested for "contradicting DRV propaganda" (*phản tuyên truyền*) and for "Giving bandits a map to help them attack government troops." The DRV leaders adopted the French colonial practice of referring to political challengers as "bandits" (*thổ phi*). We do not know the circumstances in which Cản gave his confession. It is possible that he had been pressured into confessing falsely to certain things that the party leaders feared others like Cản might be tempted to think, say, or do. His arrest and punishment would then serve as a warning to others.

After questioning Cản about his involvement with the Nationalist Party (the map and the Nationalist Party youth organization were the focus), his two interrogators asked him the following questions:

What bad things did you say about the government?

Answer: I was foolish enough to say that the Government right now is Communist, that Mr. Hồ Chí Minh is friendly with France, and that Mr. Võ Nguyên Giáp and Trần Huy Liệu are both Communists. I said that the government had not immediately established a bank to hold the gold that it had collected in order to unify its currency. [I also said] that Administrative Committees from the village up to the district level were mostly incapable of doing their jobs.

Question: Why did you help the Vietnamese Nationalist Party?

Answer: I helped the Vietnamese Nationalist Party because the Chinese were sure to help them overthrow the Government and seize power.

Cản's file also contains appeals for his release from prison written by his wife and by his father: At some point in October, Cản was released, but he was not allowed to leave Việt Trì and was not permitted to work for the DRV government.³⁶

Thành's Trip to France: May 30 to October 18, 1946

Thành and the National Assembly delegation left Hanoi for Paris on May 31, 1946. They flew in two Douglas DC-3 passenger planes accompanied by a few

French officials, including the diplomat Jean Sainteny and a general named Raoul Salan, who was soon to play a major role in the First Indochina War. The airplane journey lasted eleven days as a result of stops for maintenance, weather, and brief tourist visits in Rangoon, Calcutta, Agra, Karachi, Baghdad, and Cairo.³⁷ Because the French government had not yet been formed, Thành and his French minder, Sainteny, agreed that he would divert to the southern French resort town of Biarritz. There, with Sainteny hosting him, Thành passed the time until June 22. On that day, the two finally flew to Paris, where Thành was greeted by ecstatic crowds of Vietnamese.³⁸ On July 2, 1946, he was finally hosted for an official diplomatic reception by the newly elected French Prime Minister, Georges Bidault. As for the actual negotiations in Paris, they began on July 6—thirty-seven days after the delegation had departed Hanoi.

Both Thành and the French seem to have been in no rush. As William Duiker speculates, the French may have hoped that drawing out the discussions would help defuse the tense situation in Vietnam, sucking some of the revolutionary oxygen out of the country and facilitating eventual French reassertion of control. In what appears as a sneaky move, the French government announced its recognition of the “Autonomous Cochinchinese Republic” while Thành was in Egypt and therefore unable to launch an immediate protest.

But the extra time was surely far more valuable to Thành and his DRV regime than it was to France. As the case of the cartographer Hoàng Cân suggests, every additional day of the DRV’s existence had the psychological effect of convincing more Vietnamese that the regime was a reality and the only viable government for national independence. By October 1946, Cân had changed from a person cautiously attempting to lie low and steer clear of any significant political commitment to the DRV to a person begging for a position serving the regime in Hanoi as a cartography specialist. The party’s destruction of the Nationalists in the summer and autumn of 1946, which was easier to accomplish because of the long negotiating delays, also was surely a net gain for the DRV, outweighing any advantages that the extra time had afforded the French.

The official DRV-French negotiations were held about 50 kilometers south of Paris in the town of Fontainebleau. There, Phạm Văn Đồng and the other DRV negotiators quickly ran into the same problems that had beset Võ Nguyên Giáp during the negotiations at Dalat. The French did not recognize the unity of Vietnam. They would not allow the DRV regime to carry out an independent foreign policy and would not allow it to print its own money or to control its own economy. Major economic assets such as the coal mines of Hòn Gai (north of Hanoi) would remain France’s to exploit. On the issue of future independence,

the French negotiators also made no promises that *Đông* and the Vietnamese delegation could have used to justify further concessions.³⁹ War was coming.

The DRV delegation at Fontainebleau employed the same basic negotiating strategy that had been employed at Dalat two months earlier: Push hard on important issues, but not so hard that the talks break down. Even if the irreconcilability of the two sides is obvious and war a certainty, recognize that the French will be reluctant to crush the DRV regime in Hanoi while the talks are ongoing. Thus, no matter how hopeless the talks seem, string them along as much as possible. When the talks did break down at one point, *Thành*, who had kept his distance from the negotiations, intervened to restart them.⁴⁰

On September 10, however, *Đông* and *Thành* decided that enough was enough and finally ended the negotiations. Three days later, *Đông* and the DRV negotiators boarded a ship for Vietnam, leaving *Thành* behind. The French were eager to see the DRV leader leave the country as well and offered to fly him to Hanoi. He declined this offer, however, having a few more things to accomplish in France.⁴¹ Again, playing the role of embattled moderate, *Thành* pleaded with his French handlers for an agreement to bring back to Vietnam, as though returning “empty handed” would jeopardize his position back home.⁴² The French might have questioned the truth of this narrative by considering the remarkable length of *Thành*’s visit. It was now September—he had left Vietnam in May. Such a lengthy absence (over 100 days) was not the behavior of a leader who was insecure about his position. In reality, thanks to the work of *Trường Chinh*, *Võ Nguyên Giáp*, and other party leaders back in Vietnam, *Thành*’s political power in the DRV had improved markedly.

On September 11 and 12, he paid two visits to the American Embassy, where he employed the same strategy that he had used with American military personnel in China and Vietnam the previous year. Again, the point was to make the Americans think that he admired their political system and would be eager to form a close partnership. If he could whet the imperialist appetite of the Americans, perhaps they would be less enthusiastic about helping France’s recolonization of Indochina. Any division between the US and France helped the cause of the DRV.

With the US ambassador to France (*Jefferson Caffery*), *Thành* attempted to make the case that he was not a Communist. To the ambassador’s first secretary, *Thành* professed his admiration for Franklin Roosevelt and suggested that the DRV would favor American economic investment in Vietnam. Contradicting his entire career as a founding member of the French Communist Party, as the father of Vietnamese Communism, and as a Comintern agent, he even promised

that the DRV would give the American Navy use of Vietnam's deep-water port, Cam Ranh Bay.⁴³ There was not a chance, of course, that he would have followed through with such a promise.

Thành then called upon the Minister of Overseas France, an old Socialist friend named Marius Moutet, to sign an agreement. Moutet proposed a *modus vivendi*, which is a temporary peace agreement between two conflicting parties. According to this eleventh-hour agreement, both sides would oversee a ceasefire in Cochinchina and engage in yet another round of negotiations in January. With French national elections scheduled for November, there was still theoretically a possibility that the French Communist Party would win a major victory at the polls, seize control of the government, and change French policy in the favor of DRV independence.

Thành did not wait to see. With the *modus vivendi* in hand, he secured passage on a French naval ship headed to Vietnam. On the morning of September 19, 1946, the ship left Marseilles, arriving in Vietnam twenty-nine days later on October 18.

The War Begins: December 19, 1946

Thành returned to northern Vietnam during a growing crisis that focused on the issue of customs in the port city of Haiphong. Desperately low on cash, the DRV needed the tax money that could be collected from managing customs at the busy port. In mid-October, the French stepped over the DRV regime in Haiphong and established import-export controls. As Tonnesson explains, this aggressive French move led to a state of "almost constant nervousness" among the Vietnamese.⁴⁴

Meanwhile, the DRV regime and the French continued their edgy coexistence in Hanoi. In France, the legislative elections of November 10 resulted in a remarkable FCP victory. France's Communist politicians won more than twenty-eight percent of the popular vote, the highest of any party. Second was the Popular Republican Movement party, which took twenty-five percent. The Socialist Party was third with seventeen percent. As the head of the party that had won the most votes and held the most seats in the National Assembly, the Communist leader Maurice Thorez demanded that he lead the government. His non-Communist allies, though, the Popular Republicans and the Socialists, refused, and the Socialist Leon Blum was put into the position.⁴⁵

The DRV leaders in Hanoi waited for signs of a policy change. Meanwhile, the French continued to tighten their grip on the city, where rumors spread of an impending French attack.⁴⁶ On November 20, the customs crisis in Haiphong

escalated to a new level. A Chinese cargo ship containing gasoline for the DRV government became a test of resolve for the two sides. DRV troops attempted to contest France's confiscation of the ship and its cargo, leading to a violent tug-of-war. This quickly developed into a brutal show of force by the French, who shelled the city of Haiphong on November 23, killing hundreds of civilians. French forces seized the port city and the border town of Lạng Sơn, which lay about 200 kilometers to the north of Haiphong.

Surely this move by the French injected a sense of urgency into the DRV leaders about how and when they would evacuate their regime from Hanoi. Had they scoured the French press for signs of official protest against the shelling of Haiphong, Thành and other party leaders would have found nothing to inspire hope.⁴⁷ Indeed, by December, the impressive Communist electoral victory had brought about no significant change in French policy toward Vietnam. I doubt that Thành was surprised. But he probably remained determined to delay a break from peaceful relations a little longer—long enough to show Moscow that he had given the FCP a chance to change French policy.

By mid-December, Thành finally felt that the danger of continued coexistence in Hanoi was too great to justify extra days of respect for the French Communist Party's prospects in France. In Paris, the Communist-dominated government had been in power for over a month and had done nothing. As the scholar Milton Sachs observed, the French Communists would only criticize French colonial policy when they were an opposition party and not actually responsible for the undoing of France's empire.⁴⁸

On December 16, 1946, Vietnamese party leaders in the North sent a one-paragraph message to the Southern Party Branch informing them that the situation was "extremely tense" and that the DRV's ability to "hold large towns and cities would not decide the war." (In other words, they were about to pull out of Hanoi, Hue, and Haiphong). Comrades of the Southern Party Branch were to "prevent France from bringing to Northern and Central Vietnam all the military assets used for the conquest of the South." This meant attacking Saigon, especially military supplies in the city and transport ships.⁴⁹

Thành planned the break for the evening of December 19. That day, he penned a brief appeal to the country to join the fight against the French—it would be read over the DRV radio the following day. During the evening, DRV forces detonated explosives at the Hanoi power station. Under cover of sudden darkness, troops attacked French soldiers. Meanwhile, DRV terror squads entered the French residential areas, whose inhabitants had been supplied with guns and grenades. Well-armed, these 7,000 French civilians defended their

homes “with determination.”⁵⁰ According to Philippe de Villers, “Daybreak came to a city still in full combat, where everything said war: houses burning, bodies lying on sidewalks, puddles of blood, trees shredded or fallen, barricades, electric wires burning on the ground, etc. . . .”⁵¹

Later that day, Thành’s “National Appeal for Resistance War,” as it is called in Vietnam, was broadcast over the radio:

Compatriots all over the country!

As we desire peace, we have made concessions. But the more concessions we make, the more the French colonialists press on, for they are bent on reconquering our country.

No! We would rather sacrifice all than lose our country. Never shall we be enslaved!

Compatriots! Stand up!

Men and women, old and young, regardless of religious creed, political affiliation, or nationality, all Vietnamese must stand up to fight the French colonialists and save the Fatherland. Those who have rifles, use rifles. Those who have swords, use swords. Those who have no swords, use spades, hoes, or sticks. Everyone must oppose the colonialists and save his country!

Members of the army, the self-defense corps, and the militia!

The hour for national salvation has struck! We must shed even our last drop of blood to safeguard our country.

Even if we must endure the greatest hardships in our war of resistance, with our determination to face all sacrifices, we are bound to win!

Long live independent and unified Vietnam!

Long live the victorious Resistance!⁵²

Generally, the French forces were able to get the better of the nighttime skirmishes and reestablish control over the city (and over other locations in northern Vietnam that had come under DRV attack). Still, pockets of DRV troops would remain in Hanoi and harass their French and Vietnamese enemies sporadically for the next two months. In her 1955 account of the First Indochina War, Ellen Hammer estimates that France’s “indiscriminate repression” following the December 19 attack claimed “several thousand Vietnamese civilians.”⁵³ This was the context in which many Vietnamese heard or read Thành’s and the DRV regime’s patriotic appeals for “resistance.”

The party leaders must have understood that the December 19 issue of *Truth* would be the last for some time, making its content especially important. The

issue contained six articles. The first, titled “France’s Policy of Provocation,” argued vehemently that the DRV attack was an entirely justified response to France’s deliberate policy of provocation. The first section of the article was written in oversize block letters on the front page:

Those people who act on behalf of France in Indochina met with each other the previous day (16–12–46) in Haiphong, and the following day (17–12–46), big provocations occur in Hanoi: French troops inconsiderately shoot, kill, and pillage regular [Vietnamese] people, occupy the Finance Office, wreck the national defense constructions of our people and, during the night, send Vietnamese traitors dressed as members of the National Defense Brigades out to disseminate fliers attacking the Government.

Who thought, organized, and acted first?

The Vietnamese people and the French people will respond appropriately to this gang of reactionaries.⁵⁴

This pithy statement, which was followed by a long article further explaining its main ideas, reflected the party leadership’s continued determination to stay in line with the broader Soviet policy of “protecting peace.” Indeed, the day following the attack (and on many occasions thereafter), Thành was quick to broadcast appeals to the French for peace. In addition to staying in line with Moscow, Thành’s appeals for negotiations had the beneficial effect of sowing discord in the French camp. Some French considered these appeals to be propaganda; others saw them as signs that they could negotiate with Thành a settlement that would leave Indochina in French hands.⁵⁵

The Shift to the Countryside, 1947–1948

Historians tend to see the DRV attack on the evening of December 19, 1946 as the official start of the First Indochina War. Unofficially, the war had begun over a year earlier in Cochinchina with the British arrival in September of 1945. During the Conference at Dalat, held in late April and early May 1946, one of the sticking points had been the issue of a ceasefire in Cochinchina. There, small DRV forces had hindered the French effort to reestablish control. The December 19 attack marked a turning point because it ended the Hồ Chí Minh Government's sixteen-month legal existence in Hanoi.

The party leaders, notably Nguyễn Tất Thành, Trường Chinh, Phạm Văn Đồng, and Võ Nguyên Giáp, retreated to a secure area in the mountainous region about 180 kilometers north of Hanoi in the province of Bắc Cạn. For several months, this served as the DRV "Safe Zone" (*an toàn khu* or ATK) for the offices of the top party leaders. In the autumn of 1947, the French learned the location of this Safe Zone and organized a 1000-man commando raid. Carried out in early November as part of a larger operation, the raid appears to have caught some DRV leaders "badly off guard," nearly resulting in their capture.¹ From this point, Thành and his comrades shifted the DRV Safe Zone south to the province of Thái Nguyên, which lies about sixty kilometers north of Hanoi.

It appears from the publication of the party's official organ, *Truth*, that the DRV leaders required about three months to become truly settled in their new environs. Looking at the print run of *Truth*, we see that its sixty-ninth issue was released on December 19, 1946, the day of the attack against the French. The next issue, number seventy, appeared on March 4, 1947. As the scholar Tuong Vu shows, the DRV's party leaders drew encouragement from the development of world events. The Soviet Union would establish the Cominform in October of 1947 and begin to promote more vigorously the "Zhadanov Doctrine," which held that the world was divided into two irreconcilable camps: the "imperialist anti-democratic camp led by the United States" and the "anti-imperialist

democratic camp led by the Soviet Union.” In 1948, the DRV would receive encouraging news about the military successes of Mao Zedong’s Communist forces in China. According to Vu, these developments would help embolden the DRV’s party leaders to carry out a “radical turn” in 1948. This would mean a more overt imposition of party rule over the DRV apparatus and a more aggressive promotion of Marxist-Leninist ideas.²

The French Response to the December 19 Attack

The DRV’s December 19, 1946 attack and subsequent evacuation to the countryside convinced French leaders in Paris that, first and foremost, they needed to establish law and order. A strong military response, they hoped, would convince Thành and his followers to negotiate an end to the conflict, which meant an end to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.³ It took the French about four months to stabilize their presence in northern Vietnam. With only 26,000 troops available for operations in the North, they were limited to launching raids to secure strategic areas. First was Hanoi and Highway 5, the road that connected the city to the port of Haiphong. DRV forces had cut that road in twenty different places. During the early months of 1947, the French carried out a round-the-clock airlift to Hanoi that involved about one hundred and fifty DC-3 flights a day. The reassertion of control also involved sending troops out to dozens of garrisons in the countryside near the city. These were in a dangerously weakened and isolated state.⁴

In Hanoi, pockets of DRV guerrillas continued to fight sporadically in the city’s Old Quarter up until February 18, when they finally retreated to the countryside. In mid-April, the French sent a parachute battalion into Hòa Bình province to the west of Hanoi, taking control of the main road that connected the city to what the French called the “Tai Country” (i.e., the Tai ethnic minority region). The French had arrived late to northern Vietnam but were still able to mop up pockets of resistance with ease, promptly pushing the DRV forces into the cover of mountain bases to the north and northwest of Hanoi. Encouraged by their ability to reassert themselves in Tonkin, the French began to “presume a rapid victory.”⁵

When the dust had settled toward the end of April 1947, the French had taken control of a strategic corridor stretching across northern Indochina. It was now possible for a person to disembark at Haiphong harbor, travel along Highway 5 to Hanoi, and continue west to the Laotian border. In Central Vietnam, the

French had cleared pockets of DRV guerrillas out of Huế and secured the 300-km stretch of Highway 1, the road from Hanoi to Saigon, from Đông Hới down through Huế, Đà Nẵng, and Hội An. However, with only limited numbers of troops available for operations in northern Vietnam, the French were forced to leave enormous parts of the region untouched.⁶

The Party's War Strategy

In early April 1947, as the French reassertion of control was in its final stage, the party Central Committee held an important meeting during which top leaders discussed their new situation. How would the French be defeated? Thành saw the war as having three stages. During the first stage, the enemy would occupy the main cities, roads, military bases, and economic centers (as the French had already done). The enemy would use mechanized vehicles to transport their army over a wide area. During this first phase, the DRV's "main war goal" would be to "deplete the enemy's forces and slow them down while, at the same time, preserving our main forces." This meant avoiding "disadvantageous battles" and "pulling backward to a certain extent while still conducting partial attacks to deplete a part of the enemy's forces."⁷

The second stage of the war, according to the party's predictions, would see the French make more use of ground troops to "pillage food" and "terrorize" the DRV's defenses. This stage would also see an effort by the French to combine politics with fighting, to establish a "puppet government" (as the French had already tried to do in Cochinchina) and to force the DRV to surrender. "We will ruin that strategy of the enemy by abandoning [to them] a large number of urban areas and establishing military strongholds in the countryside and in the mountains." The enemy's strategy would also be ruined because the DRV forces would expand their mobile guerrilla warfare, bringing the fight into the areas "temporarily" controlled by the enemy, including, at times, the big cities. This strategy would enable the DRV to "deplete and liquidate" the enemy's forces while at the same time bolstering its own forces in preparation for a "general counter-offensive."⁸

The third stage, the "general counteroffensive," would involve an all-out attack on the enemy's forces, which, at that point, would be significantly weakened due to repeated smaller attacks from mobile guerrillas. "With both the subjective and objective conditions ripe, we will quickly concentrate our forces and use

mobile warfare with set-piece battles and guerrilla attacks as support to *mount a counterattack along the entire front* to destroy the enemy and retake lost areas.”

According to the Central Committee resolution, Vietnam’s geography prevented it from having “broad and secure bases” as Mao Zedong’s forces had enjoyed in China:

All bases in Vietnam are vulnerable to an enemy attack or an enemy siege. But Vietnam has a unified front of the entire people, who have experienced broad democracy and would die to preserve that regime. The situation in France is especially dangerous and France is tens of thousands of kilometers away from Vietnam. Therefore, Vietnam can still carry out armed struggle and seize victory by opening up the front in any place where the enemy is. We can strike behind the enemy’s back, in his guts, and we can organize bases not only in the mountains but also in the deltas.⁹

The policy statement did not directly discuss the most awkward issue facing Thành and the other DRV leaders—the lack of Soviet recognition and military aid. How could the Vietnamese people be convinced of the superiority of the Soviet Union and the Communist bloc if Moscow provided no support? How could the DRV military, the People’s Liberation Army, no matter how determined its soldiers, evict the French from Vietnam without a supply of weapons? How could Thành hold a Communist Party Congress, an important ritual for the consolidation of his power, without Soviet recognition and the presence of a Soviet representative?

The DRV’s Rural Apparatus

At some point during the preparations for the August 1945 seizure of power, the party leaders had divided Vietnam into a straightforward system of military zones. Vietnam’s three regions—North, Center, and South—would each be divided into three zones comprising several provinces. The zones would be numbered from one to nine and progress mostly from north to south. From 1946 to 1951, the party leaders would adjust the zone system five times, finally ending up with a smaller number of “interzones” [*liên-khu*]. By late 1949, the system was mostly settled. Though the new administrative boundaries were officially “interzones,” DRV leaders frequently abandoned that more cumbersome term and called the new groupings “zones” as before.

The most important zones for the regime were the Vietnamese North (*Việt Bắc*), which included the seventeen provinces to the north of Hanoi extending to the Chinese border. In the middle of this zone was the secret party headquarters.

Extending southward from the lower border of the Vietnamese North Zone was Zone 3. It generally comprised Hanoi and the provinces extending west from the city to the Laotian border and east to Haiphong, covering much of the Red River delta. Below Zone 3 was Zone 4, which covered north-central Vietnam. Zone 4 began in the large, poor, and densely populated province of Thanh Hóa and extended southward along Vietnam's neck down through the provinces of Nghệ An, Hà Tĩnh, Quảng Bình, Quảng Ngãi, and Thừa Thiên—the province that contained the old imperial capital of Huế.

My impression from reading archival documents is that the party leaders in the Vietnamese North Zone had less information from and less control over zones 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9, which covered the rest of Vietnam moving southward from Huế toward Saigon. All zones were led by a military chief (*khu trưởng*) and a party commissar, both of whom reported to the DRV's core leaders in the Vietnamese North zone to the north of Hanoi.¹⁰

As noted, during the August Revolution, the Communist Party contained an estimated 5,000 members. After seizing power, the party leaders called upon comrades throughout the country to recruit new members. If local leaders seemed loyal and effective, they were to be recruited for membership. A DRV directive from January of 1948 speaks glowingly of comrades in the North having been able to recruit over 10,000 new members in one two-month period. This was thanks in part to the “zealous abolition of the disease of narrowness” in recruitment.¹¹ The following August, Politburo member Lê Đức Thọ calculated that the party had 110,000 members—a ratio of one comrade for every 240 citizens in Indochina. The party was strongest in the North, having there a ratio of one member for every 130 citizens.¹² By late January of 1949, the recruitment drive had pushed the party's ranks up to 155,000.¹³ The majority of these new members would have entered the party's ranks via participation in mass organizations such as the Vietminh, the United Vietnam Association, and the various National Salvation Associations. The local party branch was the pinnacle of power in any DRV-controlled community.

Second to the party branch were the community's two political institutions, the People's Committee and the Administrative Committee. In early September of 1947, Thành released a directive calling for the establishment of Resistance War Committees at the zone level. A few days later, the DRV leaders decided to extend these committees down to the subdistrict level. It is unclear how far this process went, but on October 1, the DRV leaders released a follow-up directive stating that the newer Resistance War Committees and the original Administrative Committees were to be combined into one unit called the “Resistance

War Administrative Committees . . .” For the sake of simplicity, I will henceforth refer to them simply as “Resistance Committees.” At the subdistrict level, the Resistance Committees were to contain seven members: five would be responsible for administrative tasks, a sixth for human resources, and a seventh for military affairs.

When the DRV regime abandoned Hanoi and moved to the countryside in December 1946, two centers of administrative and intellectual gravity emerged. The most influential was, naturally, the region to the north of Hanoi that would become the Vietnamese North Zone. As mentioned, it contained the Safe Zone where Thành, Trường Chinh, Phạm Văn Đồng, and Võ Nguyên Giáp had their offices. Many influential DRV intellectuals who had been involved with the party’s first cultural newspaper, *Vanguard* (Tiên Phong), also worked in the Vietnamese North in locations not far from the party headquarters.¹⁴

A second center of gravity—clearly inferior to the Vietnamese North but important nonetheless—was the region in northern central Vietnam that comprised Zone 4 (especially the provinces of Thanh Hóa and Nghệ An). Many important DRV scholars had headed southward from Hanoi to Zone 4 at the time of the DRV’s December 1946 attack on the French. After arriving in this region, sometimes with piles of books in tow, these DRV scholars would set up a makeshift university.

Downplaying the Party’s Role

In the early spring of 1947, the party leaders grew concerned about a French attempt to create a non-Communist alternative government in Vietnam that could draw support away from the DRV. Paris wanted to change the narrative of the war from “national liberation” to a choice between communism and non-communism. Thành and his comrades also still worried about the actions of various Vietnamese Nationalists and their United National Unity Front (*Mặt trận Thống nhất Quốc gia Liên hiệp*). Leaders of this group were calling for the former emperor, Bảo Đại, to establish some sort of alternative government. In their propaganda, the DRV leaders rarely allowed the anti-communist aspect of their domestic rivals to become a topic of public discussion. Thành and his comrades stuck to simple nationalist formulations such as “independence” and “unity.”¹⁵ DRV press attacks on these non-Communist rivals stayed within the bounds of the patriot-traitor formula and nonpolitical character assassination.

Thus, Lê Văn Hoạch (leader of the French-backed autonomous Cochinchina Republic) was the “traitor ringleader in the ‘puppet government of the South.’” The Nationalist Party leader and cultural luminary, Nguyễn Tường Tam was “a

depraved drunkard writer who stole two million dollars from our Government and fled to China—before, he was the right-hand man of the Japanese, then of the Chinese, and now of the French.” As for Nguyễn Hải Thần, leader of the Vietnamese Revolutionary League, he was “the former ringleader of a gang of tigers, a man who forgot his mother tongue—he was the servant of the Chinese and now of the French, and, in spirit, he was the criminal behind the thefts and murders committed on Ôn Như Hầu Street.”¹⁶

Some of the party’s renewed motivation to downplay the Communist character of their regime may have stemmed from US President Truman’s articulation of what came to be called the “Truman Doctrine.” In March of 1947, he had asked Congress to approve 400 million dollars in aid to help “democratic” nations under pressure from Communist challenges. Truman’s target for this money was the Turkish government and the non-Communist forces involved in the Greek Civil War. Thành and his colleagues could see how the French might use American anticommunism to secure US aid for the struggle against the DRV.

Therefore, party members were to “raise the profile” of the DRV’s mass organizations so that they could better serve as a “weapon for uniting broadly all of the people.” For the United Vietnam Association:

We should invite popular figures, representatives of political parties (even the Vietnamese Socialist Party, the Revolutionary Alliance League, the faction of Bồ Xuân Luật and the reformed Nationalist Party); older leading members of the Catholic Church and other religions; and wealthy locals not affiliated with any party. We should invite all these people to stand up and deliver public appeals calling for opposition to the French reactionaries and the puppet gang.¹⁷

The party leaders called for similar efforts to bolster the profile of their Communist-founded and Communist-controlled “Democratic Party” and the Vietminh front organization. Cadres were to “reorganize” the Democratic Party at the zone and provincial level and to “return Democratic Party cadres back to the Democratic Party.”

As for the Vietminh front, DRV leaders wanted a greater effort to make it seem less a tool of the Communist Party. Within three months, the Vietminh was to be “separated” from the Communist Party “at all levels” and “all work of the Vietminh front should be sent up through the V.M. hierarchy.” Cadres were to “pay attention” to keeping Vietminh reports separate, not allowing them to be “mixed up with” the party’s reports. Generally, this movement was organized

to “[o]ppose the slanderous propaganda of the French and of the Vietnamese Nationalists saying that our Government is communist, that the Vietminh is a confidence trick (*bội tín*), that the Vietminh use terror . . .”¹⁸

A few weeks later, Politburo member Lê Đức Thọ (1911–1990) released an internal party announcement explaining new orders to “change a number of members” of the DRV government:

Comrades,

1. Because we want our Government to reflect more clearly the great unified bloc of our entire people.
2. Because we want to counter the French colonialists’ scheme to establish a puppet government.
3. Because of its advantages with respect to our international propaganda

It has been decided to change a number of members of the Government: we are going to reduce the number of people associated with the Vietminh and recruit more patriotic personalities not belonging to any party (especially those patriotic personalities who belong to the bourgeoisie, landlord, or intellectual class).¹⁹

According to Thọ’s instructions, the announcement of these personnel changes was to be followed by local-level “explanatory meetings” with soldiers and members of the general public. At the meetings, cadres were to explain that these personnel adjustments did not signal a DRV plan to “come to an arrangement” with the French. In Thọ’s instructions for how these local meetings were to transpire, we can see the strong theatrical element of party rule:

During these explanatory meetings, pay attention to allowing representatives of the Vietminh and representatives of the United Vietnam Association to make appeals together for unity. They should state clearly the French colonialists’ scheme along with the determination of our government in the resistance war. On this occasion, [local Party members] should have the representative of the United Vietnam Association praise the attitude of the Vietminh for always putting the interests of the people above all (so as to refute the idea of the reactionaries who frequently say that the Vietminh is power-hungry). Also, the masses who participate in the meeting should vote to send a telegram in support of the new government.²⁰

As the internal party documents reveal, these moves were cosmetic in nature, involving no actual reduction in the party's control over its mass organizations. Part of being a citizen in the DRV involved acting out these stage-managed displays of plurality, democracy, and support.

The Economics of People's War

Within months of the DRV leadership's relocation to the countryside, the reality of the economic challenges facing the regime became all too apparent. In the party's discourse on economics, we can see the combination of harsh wartime conditions and socialist ideals that would work together to reduce agricultural production. The DRV had no effective means of generating the revenue needed to pay for a war against a wealthy opponent like France. This meant that the regime had to extract from peasants an enormous quantity of free rice, just as the Japanese and French had needed to do during the dislocations of WWII. As a party policy report stated, "[The people] should only produce those things needed for the front and for the life of the people. [Their] production needs to be controlled by the Government."²¹ Over the next few years, however, the party leaders would learn that they could control the extraction of rice, but not its production.

Economic statements from 1947 and 1948 show the incoherence and contradictoriness of the regime's policies as party leaders attempted to square benevolent socialist ideals with the brutal realities of wartime economic management. A resolution from April 1947 explained how the DRV economy was supposed to function:

[The Government] will carry out inspection and manage foreign trade. This means that individuals will not have a monopoly on hoarding and exploitation, yet [we] will still get them to enthusiastically invest capital, to do business, to participate in production, and to supply and pursue benefits for themselves and for the country. At the same time, we will establish a state economy and an economy that has a collective character (individuals combine their resources, combine their energies, and work together).²²

The Resolution concluded its economic section with the following:

Our economic policy basically includes a few things: increase production, decrease consumption, (these two things must be done according to a plan),

reduce the contribution of the people (implement a new tax system during the resistance war), develop collective production, call upon the wealthy to invest, implement rewards and punishments (come up with prizes, promote labor heroes, punish those who are corrupt), unify the financial sector, and preserve the value of Vietnam's currency.²³

These economic goals raised difficult questions. Why would a capitalist “enthusiastically invest” in the economy if the government's intention was to reduce popular consumption? How could a “capitalist” or any person run a business if he or she did not have control over inventory, as the intention to eliminate “hoarding” suggested? And how would a reduction of the people's consumption square with a reduction of the burden on them? Was a reduction of people's consumption a policy goal or was it a reality that was happening regardless of the regime's intentions? What would be the relationship between the planned state economy and the existing private economy—could the two compete for the same markets?

By the beginning of 1948, the party leaders were beginning to see how the problem of production in particular and of the economy in general could imperil the DRV's war effort and the regime's overall viability. “If we want to have the people enthusiastically participate in the resistance war and support the resistance-war Government, we *must pay special attention to improving the people's quality of life.*” As the resolution warned, “If the people are too miserable, they are easily swindled by the enemy and easily develop tendencies toward skepticism and despondency.”²⁴ The shortage of rice also sometimes directly affected the fighting capacity of the DRV's troops:

Generally speaking, we can provide for our own grain needs, but we are not yet self-sufficient in the field of textiles and everyday commodities. Because there are places that are not self-sufficient, the problem of supply has become critical. In Quảng Bình, Cao Bằng, and Bắc Cạn provinces, hunger has become an issue, and in many places, the army has had to pull back only because of lack of supply.²⁵

All aspects of the economy were struggling. Industry was “very poor.” Some machinery had been taken into the DRV-controlled zones with the intention of reassembling it there. That proved impossible in most cases, meaning that industrial productivity “dropped dramatically.” As for the “handicraft” economy, a lack of materials in the DRV zones made it difficult for these small businesses to survive. “Many professional craftsmen and handicraft workers have become

jobless and returned to the French-occupied cities hoping to reestablish their old trade there.”²⁶ On the crucial agricultural front, the trend toward leaving farmland uncultivated was already apparent:

In many farming areas, more fields have been farmed, but there are also many places where the lack of manpower or its high expense, or because of proximity to the enemy, compels people to leave a part of their land unfarmed. Those plantations that we confiscated from the French have been ruined, especially those devoted to farming agricultural products for industry. We have not paid attention to them and also do not yet have the ability to farm or manage them. Yet we also have not been willing to divide that land up for the peasants (at the very least we could distribute it to them for rice farming to be managed by the people’s administration).²⁷

The DRV leaders were reluctant to oversee a true redistribution of land. Redistributed land was to be “managed by the people’s administration,” which meant that the new user of the land would not own it (i.e., could not sell the land). In fact, the party leaders always referred to their policy as “temporary distribution” (*tạm cấp*), with the adjective “temporary” meaning that the state retained ownership.

Economic Solutions

One thing that Thành, Trường Chinh, and other party leaders noted was the relationship between the circulation of goods and their production. “Among those conditions needed for the stimulation of production, *transport is fundamental*, because there are many commodities and agricultural products that are produced, but there is no way of selling them. So, they accumulate and lose their value, discouraging the producer.” Meanwhile, in other places, a shortage of goods was raising the price of essential commodities like rice, salt, and textiles. The party leaders viewed this problem through a Marxist lens: What was needed, therefore, was intervention by the DRV state, which would overcome the irrationality of the market and “sell essential goods cheaply to places that needed them.”²⁸ As the resolution warned:

These days, our economy is not yet self-sufficient; foreign trade has come to a halt, and products are scarce. Therefore, products from the areas controlled by the enemy are flooding into our free area. If we do not increase our production appropriately and get our transportation stabilized, our economy will be under the sway of the enemy’s and the issue of the people’s material wellbeing will be dependent on the enemy’s economy.²⁹

In other words, the peasants would have to buy from and sell their rice to areas controlled by the French. This would result in peasants parting with two things that the DRV regime desperately needed: agricultural products and hard currency (i.e., French *piastres*). Thus, we can see how the presence of nearby markets threatened the DRV regime's ability to mobilize the materials needed to wage war. More generally, we can see how the demands of war could reinforce fundamental Communist beliefs such as the suspicion of markets. The danger posed by the loss of material wealth to French-controlled zones set the DRV leaders on a path toward finding ways of denying peasants access to those markets. To this end, Trường Chinh began to promote the slogan, "Vietnamese use Vietnamese goods."³⁰

In September 1948, anticipating the coming October rice harvest and French troop movements in DRV-controlled areas, Lê Đức Thọ called upon comrades in the apparatus to "organize group harvesting" (*tổ chức gặt tập đoàn*). Because of the typical lack of labor during harvest time, "administrative offices and local mass organizations need to release a strict order along with the following slogans: 'No ripe rice left in the field!' and 'Harvesting rice needs to be like striking the enemy!'"³¹

With respect to the DRV's "financial" situation, Trường Chinh noted:

We have not printed money fast enough to meet the daily growing demand. Some places like small bills, making trade and exchange difficult. Other places rely on printing money and neglect the need to increase production, meaning that inflation has become a risk. Offices and mass organizations, along with private enterprises, compete with each other to exchange for Indochinese Piastres in order to buy foreign goods. Meanwhile Vietnamese money does not yet have value in the international market. In many places the value of Vietnamese money has fallen relative to French money (even to the extent that, in Cao Bằng, one French piastre is worth three Vietnamese dollars).

Our country's financial situation is still stuck in the situation of earning little and spending a lot. To fill in the gaps in our budget, we only know how to print more money. Therefore, the money collected for our reserves has been depleted for many reasons. We have not yet organized the inspection of our national finances from top to bottom.³²

Time and repeated "inspections" would show that there simply were no effective measures to address the financial situation in the extraordinary conditions

of war. The party would be “collecting a little and spending a lot” for the next four decades.

Traitor Lists and the First Official Patriotic Emulation Campaign

In early January 1948, the party Central Committee convened for its normal beginning-of-year meeting. The DRV leaders discussed the poor results of the land confiscation and redistribution policy and expressed their intention to give this policy a push in the interest of increasing production. About a month after the conclusion of the Central Committee meeting, the party leaders released an “Order on the Land and Belongings of Vietnamese Traitors.” About one page in length, the order mentioned that the Central Committee had decided to “confiscate the lands of Vietnamese traitors and distribute it to the tillers.”³³

Thành and his lieutenants liked to have the more radical communist policies originate from the National Assembly so that they would appear to have the sanction of the people through a Western democratic process. To the outside world and perhaps to the Vietnamese themselves, this National Assembly path would make the policy seem to have originated from elected officials responsible to their constituents rather than from a group of five or six Communist Party leaders. As the order explained: “In order to implement that Resolution, the Government Party Committee will send the request to the Government at some point in the near future. The Government will then create an order.”³⁴

The internal order explained briefly how the confiscation and redistribution of property were to be carried out:

The immediate responsibility of the zone-level [Party branches] is as follows:

1. Make a list of Vietnamese traitors since before the revolution until now and then inspect their land and belongings. They should be investigated before the law (even if absent). The Ministry of Justice will carry out the confiscation. *Pay attention:* If the Ministry of Justice shows any hesitation [*lừng chừ*ng], then they must be pressured to move quickly.
2. Figure out a way to divide up the land evenly and appropriately.

In carrying out the Resolution of the Expanded Meeting of the Central Committee, people should pay attention to the following:

1. If you want to put somebody on the list of Vietnamese traitors, it must be based on concrete, not vague, actions.
2. With respect to those who are opportunists, we must be lenient.
3. When we confiscate the land and personal belongings of Vietnamese traitors, we must allow for their wife and children to have some means of making a living if they had nothing to do with [the traitorous activity].
4. In carrying out propaganda, we should not make the capitalists and landlords misunderstand and think that this is a first step toward confiscating the land of landlords. This could make them confused and worried.³⁵

From the above directive, it is apparent that the question of whether somebody were put on the “traitor list” was decided by party members at the zone level and had little to do with the DRV’s Ministry of Justice. After the targeted person’s guilt had been established by a party member, the Ministry of Justice would be called in to “investigate.” The DRV legal representative would then announce the targeted “traitor’s” guilt—as though the issue had been determined by scrupulous legal procedure—and carry out the arrest and property confiscation.

The First Patriotic Emulation Campaign: March 1948

As another means of addressing the problem of declining production, on March 27, 1948 the party launched its first “patriotic emulation campaign.” This was a mobilization technique that would become a fixture in Vietnamese life under the party-state. The author of the order, Trường Chinh, used his romanticized writing style to announce and explain the campaign. Eager to conceal the DRV regime’s arbitrary and authoritarian way of operating, Chinh described the campaign as having arisen spontaneously from the people:

After the glorious feat of arms of our army and people in the Vietnamese North, a wind of enthusiasm has blown throughout the country. In mass organizations as much as in individuals, in professional offices as much as in army units, one and all feel in themselves a sense of high emotion and burning desire. Everybody wants to do something remarkable to contribute to the resistance war and national construction.³⁶

The campaign’s stated goal was to inspire the DRV population to “try hard to work quickly, work well, and to work beautifully,” regardless of one’s occupation. The emulation campaign was entirely spiritual in character—people were supposed to work hard primarily so that their own self-improvement would bring benefit to the nation. On a practical level, the lack of material incentives for the

campaign was essential because the government could not afford to reward people. The little money that did remain in the DRV's coffers had to be used for the purchase of such expensive items as weapons and medical supplies.

The details of the emulation campaign suggest how some of the joy could be drained from the movement. The campaign was to be carefully controlled by the party, with work norms devised by higher-ups for those beneath them to meet. For the majority of people (peasants), this meant receiving production targets from local party officials. As was often the case, the attempt at a new mobilization technique required the establishment of new bureaucratic positions to lead and monitor the campaign. "When the [emulation] plan has been put forward, so as to guarantee its implementation, [cadres] need to organize the supervision and expedition of the work, its inspection, and the method of providing rewards and punishments."³⁷

To ensure the success of the Patriotic Emulation campaign, Tr ng Chinh envisioned the creation of three new bureaus and two subcommittees:

1. *Emulation Bureau* [Ban Thi đua]: responsible for managing and pushing forward the emulation movement.
2. *Inspection Bureau* [Ban Ki m tra]: responsible for observing the emulation work in order to draw lessons and fix weaknesses and mistakes in a timely fashion. It will help the Emulation Bureau manage the campaign.
3. *Judging Bureau* [Ban Ch m thi]: responsible for judging the accomplishments of the emulation campaign. The bureau also needs to set the regulations for rewards and punishments in a just and enlightened manner.³⁸

In addition to these three new bureaus, Chinh called for the establishment of a Propaganda Subcommittee to focus solely on "pushing forward" the movement and a Professional Subcommittee "to think constantly of ways to improve working technique."

Subsequent parts of Chinh's order stressed the techniques party members should use to make the emulation movement a success. Again, the focus was always on a spirit of sacrifice for the "resistance war" and for "country and race." There was no mention of traditional sources of motivation such as love of family and community along with that natural human desire to eat well. The description of the emulation campaign stressed "enthusiasm" and "excitement" but left unexplained what the role of "punishments" would be in the process and why, if the people yearned to do something for the resistance war, punishments would be necessary. Ultimately, Chinh concluded that the emulation movement was an "opportunity to apply the principles of the new way of living and to put into

effect the work style of our Party. As Stalin said: ‘Combine American practicality with Russian revolutionary spirit in our work.’”³⁹

Anti-Spy Work

The combination of being ideologically wedded to policies while being confronted with their lack of encouraging results led Thành and the other party leaders to promote various scapegoat narratives. These took on different forms but shared the common function of exonerating sacred party policies from poor results. As Trường Chinh explained in the summer of 1948, “Many of the Party’s policies are very correct, but they have not been implemented effectively partly because of weaknesses in the Party’s organization. The organization cannot guarantee the implementation of resolutions and orders.” Another section placed the blame on the failure of the party to expand its membership adequately. “Party policies have not been implemented completely enough mainly because the Party has not expanded enough or because its composition is complicated.”

Another key discourse, closely related to these “organizational weaknesses” was the idea that the party’s purity had been compromised by “spies” who were “sabotaging” its “correct policies.” This was particularly the case with land policies, “which cannot be implemented because many comrades in the subdistrict-level Party cells as well as in the Party Committees of the Resistance War Administrative Committees are petit-bourgeois intellectuals, rich peasants, or landlords.”⁴⁰ Echoing these same sentiments, Politburo member Hoàng Quốc Việt, in his report to the conference, stated that “in admitting bourgeois intellectuals into the Party, especially those who had belonged to other political parties, [we] must be extremely careful and take precautions against opportunistic elements, elements whose minds are thoroughly infected with nationalist thinking and who worm their way into the Party.”⁴¹

By September of 1948, the party leaders were promoting the idea that “spies” had infiltrated not just the party but the entire DRV apparatus. “The Standing Committee sees that in many places, a number of spies have infiltrated Government military and administrative offices.” There were allegedly places where these “spies” had “climbed into positions of significance” and had “infiltrated the Party’s ranks.” The directive warned that these spies, wanting to “earn trust so as to be placed in important positions, give off the impression of being very enthusiastic and hardworking.”

The party Standing Committee reminded members of the six methods of countering spy infiltration. These included carefully inspecting the “dossiers” (*lý lịch*) of party members before awarding promotions or approving the transfer of

a cadre from one location to another. More significant for the work atmosphere of the DRV state were the fourth and fifth measures:

4. Organize mutual inspections of each other's actions, lifestyle, social interactions, spending habits—even those of the most enthusiastic and hard-working [co-workers]. Increase criticism and self-criticism.
5. Immediately begin a secret inspection of the dossiers of workers in government and military offices. Do the same for Party members.⁴²

Two weeks later, on October 10, 1948, Chinh announced the establishment of yet another bureaucratic instrument: The Central Committee Inspection Bureau (*Ban Kiểm tra Trung ương*). As the resolution explained: “All work of the Party needs to penetrate from top to bottom, and the Party's policies must be thoroughly implemented.” For this reason, the party leaders had established the new Inspection Bureau, which was to travel to the various zones to “determine whether the Party's policies were being implemented and whether they were implemented correctly.”⁴³

The Evolution of Land Policies

A sacred principle of DRV's leaders was that poor peasants, especially landless ones, would support the regime and become enthusiastic producers if given land. As we have seen, though, in areas controlled by the DRV, large areas of farmland were being left fallow. Landowners were struggling to find people willing to rent their land. By August 1948, the DRV leaders were edging toward punitive measures to motivate farmers to start cultivating fallow land. A report drafted by Politburo member Hoàng Quốc Việt instructed comrades to expropriate any land left fallow for more than two harvests and “temporarily distribute” it to the families of local soldiers.⁴⁴

Should the party's land policy be changed? A long policy report that was probably penned by Trường Chinh described how land reform was approached by “new democracies” of the Eastern Bloc:

Each new democracy carries out the “land reform” program that is suitable to the country's own conditions. For example: Poland confiscates the land of land owners who have more than 200 hectares. Czechoslovakia confiscates with compensation the land of landowners who have fifty hectares or greater, and, in China, the people's government confiscates the land

of landlords in general, but leaves landlords with some land—enough for their families to live on.⁴⁵

Chinh made no judgment about which policy seemed most suitable to Vietnam. The point was to illustrate the flexibility of the Soviet bloc. But certainly, within Vietnam's Communist movement, confiscation of the land of "landlords in general" (the policy of the Chinese Communists) had been the basic goal consistently since the late 1920s.

For the present, Chinh signaled a shift to a slightly more aggressive land reform policy, stressing that the anti-imperialist and anti-feudal struggles could not be entirely separated. He was careful to explain that circumstances had changed since 1941 when, at the 8th Plenum, the party had advanced its policy of allying with the landlords. At that time, Chinh had argued that the patriotism of the Vietnamese people was enough to earn support for the anti-French struggle. Now, if the party "did not abolish feudal remnants and carry out land reform, a very large proportion of the masses would be determined not to take the risk (*liêu*) of participating in the resistance war in a zealous and reliable manner."⁴⁶

For all Chinh's elaborate justification, though, the party's land policy changed only slightly. Three times in the space of his roughly two-page description of the current land reform policy he stressed the "gradual" nature of the process by which "feudal remnants" would be reduced and finally eliminated. He reminded comrades that land reform policies could only be carried out "*within the scope of actions that do not harm the Unified Front against the French Colonialist Aggressors*."⁴⁷ Later in his report, Chinh clarified that the party's policy was to "rely on the landless, poor, and middle peasants, to unify with the rich peasants, and to win over the landlords."⁴⁸ And again, despite his talk of the inseparability of the anti-imperialist and anti-feudal tasks, Chinh still stressed the need for rural elites ("landlords and rich peasants") and the rural poor ("landless and poor peasants") to "compromise" and "make concessions" with each other.

Rent Reduction

The problem with production tempted the party leaders to intervene in ever deeper ways in local economies. One of the reasons why a large amount of land was being left fallow was the expense of hiring labor. Thus, Chinh stated that the party would solve this problem by "setting wage prices" so that the laborer would "not suffer a loss" and the land owner would "not suffer too great an expense."⁴⁹ In a similar spirit, Chinh decreed that "land owners do not have the

right to ‘lay off’ laborers or to take back rented land if the renter is still paying rent regularly (except in case of a lost harvest).” As for the renters, they “must pay enough rent in accordance with Government regulations.” What were the government regulations? All land rents were to be reduced twenty-five percent from the pre–August Revolution level.

A simpler method of dealing with land-rent rates might have been for the DRV government to fix them at a certain percentage of the harvest. I believe that ideological reasons made Thành, Chinh, and other party leaders loathe to follow this path. If the regime were to announce a particular rate (for example, fifteen percent of the harvest), it would be tantamount to publicly acknowledging the existence of a non-exploitative rent level. Such a move might suggest that exploitation could be resolved peacefully by the state through the means of reforms. In such circumstances, it would be more difficult to justify continuing the revolutionary process to a large-scale expropriation of elite land. Elites could claim that they had followed the rate set by the “people’s government.”

Lack of Science in DRV Land Policy Discourse

The party’s discussions and justifications of land policy rarely, if ever, included any positive argument based on actual experiences in DRV-controlled areas. At no point did Chinh or any other party leaders claim that data on peasant participation in the resistance war (such as the speed and completeness with which villages met military conscription quotas relative to each other) or data on agricultural productivity showed that villages having carried out the party’s reforms had experienced a boost in either participation or productivity. It seems safe to assume, then, that the actual results did not support the party’s contentions.

Indeed, Trường Chinh’s “two new conditions” justifying a more aggressive land policy had nothing to do with the success of those policies in Vietnam:

First, after the August Revolution, the state passed into the hands of the people; a democratic republican regime in Vietnam was established with a fairly progressive constitution. The state had a new democratic character which means that it belonged to the various classes of people carrying out resistance war, and it [the state] was under the leadership of the working class [i.e., the Communist Party].⁵⁰

The first condition concerned the level of control held by the Communist Party in the regime (i.e., about whether the party was in a position strong enough to carry out the reforms). The second focused on the favorable international situation:

Second, after the recent world war, the new democratic forces in the world increased significantly. The Soviet Union was completely victorious [in the war] and is now large and powerful. Many new-democratic countries have been established, anti-colonial revolutions are in full swing, and, most noteworthy of all, revolutionary China has achieved a succession of victories. In the context of such a seething world revolution, the Indochinese revolution cannot but be influenced by the world revolution. [The Indochinese revolution] must find in the world revolutionary movement new sources of help and new experiences in order to move forward.⁵¹

Neither of the two conditions for changes in land policy (level of party control and “seething world revolution”) stemmed from results-based facts on the ground in DRV-controlled areas. Instead, land policies were closely tied to external factors—such as positioning the DRV as an orthodox and loyal “new democracy” worthy of Soviet recognition and aid.

Looking at the first three years of the party’s rule, we can see early versions of features that would, in 1953, become fundamental elements of the land reform campaign. First was the staging of a sadistic and sensational crime scene (the Ôn Như Hầu Affair) to demonize a targeted group (the Nationalist Party) and to justify its suppression. Second was the creation of lists of traitors who could be targeted for land and property expropriation. Third was a scapegoat narrative of local party impurity—the notion that “spies” and “saboteurs” had “wormed their way into” the DRV apparatus—to explain the poor results of policies. Fourth was the use of “criticism and self-criticism” as a means of compelling party underlings to accept blame for disappointing results. And fifth was the positive connection between the development of party policies and the proximity of Communist bloc allies.

That final element, the proximity of Communist bloc allies, would be resolved in late 1949 with the victory of Mao Zedong’s Communist forces in China. Within a few months, Mao, Stalin, and the Eastern Bloc countries would all grant the DRV diplomatic recognition. Soviet weapons and Chinese advisors would arrive in northern Vietnam soon thereafter, fundamentally changing the complexion of the war in the DRV’s favor. However, Thành and other party leaders would find, to their frustration, that a change in the war’s complexion would not reverse the regime’s growing economic troubles.

The Turning Point, 1949–1950

In the spring of 1947, French leaders had begun to realize that they could not negotiate an acceptable settlement of the Indochina crisis with their adversary, Hồ Chí Minh. In December of that year, Paris had moved to “Plan B,” which was the establishment of a noncommunist and French-friendly alternative government that would hopefully draw support away from the DRV. The Vietnamese Nationalist leaders whom the French were able to recruit for this project insisted that the former emperor, Bảo Đại, be brought on board. Though he had agreed in principle to this “solution,” Bảo Đại refused to play this new role unless the French agreed to two terms. The first was official recognition of Vietnamese independence and the second was incorporation of Cochinchina, which the French had separated from the rest of the country, into the new noncommunist Vietnamese government. Throughout 1948, Bảo Đại dug in his heels on these conditions until Paris finally yielded. On March 8, 1949, the two sides signed the Elysée Accords, which made official the establishment of the Associated State of Vietnam.¹ The term “associated” meant that this alternative Vietnamese government would be “associated” with Laos and Cambodia as part of the French Union.

Though the “independence” enjoyed by the State of Vietnam (as it is usually called) was limited, Nguyễn Tất Thành and the Politburo took seriously the threat that this noncommunist alternative posed to their regime. By the beginning of 1949, they had begun to establish “denunciation” (*tố cáo*) as a feature of DRV political culture. In the summer of 1948, the responsibility for uncovering traitors had been confined to members of the DRV state. In January of 1949, the Politburo ordered local cadres to “make clear to the people the responsibility of counterespionage” and to “praise members of the population or of the apparatus who discover nests of spies.” The Politburo also called for more efforts to propagandize anti-spy cases “as an example” for the people and to “develop [in them] both a consciousness of and sense of responsibility for counterespionage work.”²

From a professional perspective, the party leaders called on Public Security offices to “train a number of their professional cadres for the task of interrogating suspects” and to “send a number of Public Security and intelligence workers overseas for study.” In addition to these measures, security cadres were to train local militia members how to “ask for papers” from people. And finally, the party leaders called upon the security apparatus “to make for the whole country a traitor list, organized by severity of crime, so that these people could be monitored closely.”³

The “Buy Rice for Hồ Chí Minh” Campaign

In early August 1949, the party Central Committee decided that the results of measures taken over the summer to ensure the supply of rice to the army were “not as wished.” Therefore, a new form of mobilization focusing on the person of Hồ Chí Minh would be carried out. Thành would write a letter to the people imploring them to sell their rice to the government.⁴ As the Central Committee directive explained:

From the Central Committee to Inter-Zone Party Branches:

The reason for this Directive is that, during the last one or two months, shortages of rice and salt in the army have reached very dangerous levels, especially in the Vietnamese North region. Last month, the enemy attacked Tuyên Quang and Phú Thọ; this month they have attacked Bắc Ninh and Bắc Giang. Meanwhile, our soldiers have to eat porridge and then go fight the enemy.

Our policy of price-setting has been implemented but has not attained the results we had hoped for.

Therefore, Mr. Hồ is writing this letter, using Mr. Hồ’s own prestige to spur on our countrymen. With careful mobilization, it will lead to victory. However, we will still carry out the policy of price-setting.

This attempt to motivate our countrymen to sell rice in this manner will reach the ears of the enemy, and they will use it to counter our propaganda. But whether we do it or not, they will still say bad things about us and still fabricate things for which to criticize us. Therefore, we should not be reluctant for that reason.⁵

The three-page directive provided detailed instructions about how the Hồ Chí Minh letter was to be used. First, party members at the zone level were to print the letter in an “artistic manner” and send a copy to every “inter-subdistrict”

party branch and, ideally, to every village. Attached to the directive was a simple design for the creation of a rice-sale signup sheet. This was to be posted in some prominent place in a village.

This having been completed, the party leaders hoped, but probably did not expect, that many people with spare rice would, of their own volition, sign the register. After the push for “donative rice sales” had been made, the directive explained, cadres should tally and publicize the donations for each subdistrict, district, and province to create a friendly competition—the “patriotic emulation.” With respect to rewards, the directive explained: “After you have received the [rice-donation registration] forms, you should print out a number of certificates of praise from Mr. [Hồ] to give as rewards.”⁶

Presuming that this voluntary approach would not be sufficient, the “Buy Rice for Hồ Chí Minh” directive explained how the campaign was to be promoted in a subdistrict meeting. Local cadres would read the Hồ Chí Minh letter aloud and then open the rice-purchase registry book. “One or two people should volunteer to go first, rich as well as poor. Then, have another person follow them; then, get one or two more volunteers; then, continue taking turns like that until none is left.” The local party members running the meeting were to note which family members had not attended. At the conclusion of the meeting, the responsible cadres were to take the rice-purchase registry book along with the Hồ Chí Minh letter to those absent households and explain what was required.⁷

So “essential” was this mobilization for the sale of rice to the DRV state that the directive instructed all levels of party and government to “set aside for it the most skilled and respected comrades.” If the best cadres were busy with other work, party leaders were to “arrange that work so that another person could do it during the period that the [outstanding cadre] is busy purchasing rice.” As for the length of the rice-buying campaign, it was to take no more than seven days.

The rice collected from the campaign may have been intended for the DRV military’s first infantry division (roughly 15,000 troops), which was created on August 28, 1949 by combining three regiments and one battalion. In addition to needing rice, this new division, named the 308th, needed arms and ammunition. Though the PRC had not yet been officially established, Thành may have calculated that an imminent Chinese Communist victory presaged the arrival of long-hoped-for military aid. The 308th Division would be the first recipient of aid when it arrived. In January of 1950, the DRV would put together a second infantry division (the 304th). By the end of 1951, the People’s Liberation Army would have seven infantry divisions ready for action, all outfitted with Soviet weapons.⁸

Socialist Bloc Recognition, January 1950: Thành's First Meeting with Stalin

On October 1, 1949, Mao Zedong announced the establishment of the PRC, marking the official end of the Chinese Civil War. Within a few days of this announcement, Thành sent two envoys to Beijing for discussions of military assistance. By the time they arrived, Mao had already left the PRC capital for Moscow to negotiate a treaty with Stalin.⁹

As was his tendency, Stalin gave Mao a chilly reception, questioning whether the Chinese leader was a true Communist or just a nationalist. Stalin even suggested that Mao might be an “Asian Tito,” a reference to Yugoslavia’s independent-minded Communist leader, Josip Tito.¹⁰ This approach was a common tactic of Stalin’s, the point being to put his guest on the defensive and perhaps to justify the Soviet Union’s lack of support for his guest. (Stalin’s similar treatment of Thành in Moscow a few weeks later should be viewed as typical behavior and not as a sign that the Soviet leader harbored special suspicions of his Vietnamese counterpart’s commitment to Marxism-Leninism.)

While Stalin and Mao were becoming acquainted in Moscow, the PRC vice-chairman and third-in-charge, Liu Shaoqi, oversaw daily affairs for the newly established regime. On December 24, 1949, he called a meeting of the CCP Politburo to discuss recognition of the DRV. According to the historian Qiang Zhai, the issue at hand was how much the PRC cared about or needed official French recognition for their government. Obviously, Chinese recognition of the DRV was likely to preclude French recognition of the PRC. The CCP Politburo concluded that support for the DRV against the “imperialist bloc” was the more important consideration.¹¹ Liu then cabled Mao in Moscow and asked for permission to recognize the DRV, which the latter gave. On December 28, Liu sent a cable to Thành expressing the PRC’s willingness to establish official diplomatic relations and stating that the Soviet Union and the other Communist-bloc countries might soon follow suit. In other words, the PRC was going to lobby the Soviets on behalf of the DRV.¹²

Indeed, back in Moscow, Mao promoted the DRV to Stalin, suggesting that he recognize Thành’s regime and invite him (known to the Soviets as “Din”) to Moscow as well—a suggestion that Stalin accepted. Mao’s crucial support for Thành meant that the relationship between China and the DRV began on an unequal footing, with Thành indebted to his Chinese counterpart. That unequal character became more pronounced when Stalin decided to assign Mao

responsibility for advising the DRV and managing the dispensation of Soviet military aid.¹³

After figuring out official protocols surrounding the recognition of each other's governments, Liu needed someone to manage a PRC mission to the DRV. In early January, he chose a man named Luo Guibo (in Vietnamese, "La Quý Ba"), who was director of the CCP Central Military Commission. At age forty-two, Luo was a generation younger than the fifty-eight-year-old Thành. As Luo notes in his memoirs, the original plan was for him to spend three months in the DRV, where he would investigate the situation and determine what sort of Chinese aid was appropriate. He would end up working in Vietnam (eventually as the first Chinese ambassador) for the next eight years.¹⁴

On January 18, 1950, the PRC announced its recognition of the DRV—the Soviet Union followed on January 30. Four years and three months after the establishment of the DRV back in September of 1945, its isolation was over. The importance of this moment for Thành cannot be overstated. As the leader of Vietnam's Communist Party, his duty was to deliver Soviet support. Having worked for the Comintern during the 1920s and 1930s, he was supposed to be well connected with Moscow. Among the Vietnamese people, Stalin's four-year cold shoulder had helped neither Thành's prestige nor that of the Soviet Union, which, since the late 1920s, Vietnamese Communists had promoted tirelessly as the champion of anticolonial movements.

Thành's Meeting with Stalin and Mao in Moscow

After learning that the PRC would recognize the DRV, Thành prepared for a prompt journey to Beijing (and hopefully to Moscow). This involved a seventeen-day journey across the Vietnamese North zone to the Chinese border, where he met with CCP representatives who transported him to Beijing.¹⁵ No doubt news of his trip to Beijing was leaked to Central Committee members who were convening near the party headquarters for their standard beginning-of-year meeting. One can imagine the delight with which comrades at the meeting received a letter from Thành, who explained his exciting absence with droll, ironic humor: "Comrades, I regret that, because I am a little tired, I cannot meet with you at this All-Nation Party meeting."¹⁶ Thành arrived in Beijing on January 30, 1950, spent two days in the PRC capital, and left for Moscow on February 2. After taking off from Beijing, his aircraft flew almost directly north over Mongolia to the Russian city of Chita, which lay on the Trans-Siberian Railroad.

A message sent by Thành to Stalin during this stop on the journey suggests that the DRV leader had been worrying about the “optics” of his Moscow visit. His professed reason for asking that his visit be kept a secret was concern that the French might “undertake political and military actions.”¹⁷ It is unlikely that Thành was worried about whether party leaders back home—Trùng Chinh, Phạm Văn Đồng, Võ Nguyên Giáp, and others—could be trusted to handle any situation that arose. (Recall Thành’s 140-day trip to France during 1946.) Thành’s real concern, I believe, was the potential damage to his prestige that apathetic and disrespectful treatment from Stalin could cause among Vietnamese.

In 1946, when he had visited France, a capitalist country that theoretically had every motivation to reduce Thành’s prestige, the French had rolled out the red carpet and, for the most part, treated him with the dignity of a national leader. If Thành’s visit to the capital of the socialist bloc became public knowledge, and it became known that Stalin had ignored him for a few days or had otherwise given him less than red-carpet treatment (as Stalin had done with Mao), some Vietnamese might be upset and question the wisdom of joining the Soviet bloc. This concern may have been what motivated Thành to write to Stalin that the visit could be official if the Soviet leader preferred. However, in that case, wrote Thành, “Upon arrival, I would like you to permit me to come directly to you.”¹⁸

The most famous story from Thành’s February 1950 Moscow visit was recounted by Khrushchev in his memoir. Thành, Mao, Stalin, and Khrushchev were at a reception held to celebrate the signing of the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance. Thành approached Stalin and asked him lightheartedly why he could not sign a similar treaty with the DRV. Stalin replied that signing such a treaty would reveal Thành’s presence in Moscow, which was supposed to be a secret. According to Khrushchev, Thành had responded to this comment by suggesting that Stalin arrange a plane to take him (Thành) up into the air for a few minutes and then land at the Moscow airport. An official red-carpet greeting for Thành could then be staged as though the DRV leader had just arrived. According to Khrushchev, Stalin laughed off this proposal.¹⁹

The General Mobilization Decree: The Totalitarian Push, February 1950

In Thành’s absence, the party Central Committee held its yearly January meeting. The “main focus” would be the “mobilization effort to shift toward the general counter-offensive” in the war against the French and their Vietnamese

allies, the State of Vietnam. Among the roughly two hundred pages of reports that Trường Chinh, Võ Nguyên Giáp, Hoàng Quốc Việt, and Phạm Văn Đồng read at the meeting, one of the most significant sections appears roughly midway through Chinh's opening report. The section is titled "The General Mobilization of Human, Material, and Intellectual Resources for Victory." Chinh began by stating that shifting to a "general counter-offensive" was going to require a "general mobilization." Up to that point, the party had "tended toward the use of inspiration and persuasion in matters of mobilization and had been light on the use of compulsion." The method of mobilizing people through "patriotic emulation movements" now needed to be supplemented by the creation of a "general mobilization law." As Chinh explained:

This is true. When mobilizing through patriotic emulation movements, whoever loves his country works a lot, whoever loves his country a little works a little. And if somebody does not participate at all in the patriotic emulation, then it matters not at all. As a result, the poor and miserable working class people usually sacrifice their life, labor, and property for the nation with enthusiasm. Meanwhile, the majority of those people who live through exploitation are selfish, enriching themselves. Or they only contribute what they refer to as "for the resistance war" while using their financial influence to evade their responsibility.

While our compatriots are sacrificing everything to fight the French, there are still those who enrich themselves through speculation, those who still engage in scams, who pilfer public property, who still are more interested in having fun. There are those on the government payroll who have not accomplished anything in their work.

Our regime has been too soft.²⁰

At this point, Chinh finally stated directly what had been implied in many different ways by the party's various policies:

There is still a great deal of potential in the people, but up to now, a large part of that potential has not been dredged out, has not yet been tapped. During this period of intense struggle, we must announce that the people's labor, property, tools, and materials are the Government's to use. The Government has complete power to use [these things] to the benefit of the resistance struggle. Whoever has goods must give goods. Whoever has labor must give labor. Whoever has intellect must give his intellect.

Nobody may stand outside the people's resistance struggle. Everybody must serve the Fatherland according to his ability.²¹

As Chinh explained, the party leadership wanted a decree passed that would legalize the use of state power to mobilize all of the people's wealth, time, and labor:

That decree has to be strict. Anybody who evades his responsibility and sabotages the resistance war in one way or another will be punished with a direct hand. We must shoot those who step out of line and engage in speculation in the same way that we need to shoot those who betray the country and who defraud their renters. At the same time, we need to punish any people who sabotage the decree on the general mobilization by intentionally trying to avoid that decree or who exploit that decree for their own selfish purposes.²²

This party meeting in January of 1950 and the subsequent announcement of the General Mobilization Decree appear to mark the official beginning of an open push toward totalitarian-style governance.

The DRV State as "Special Legal Regime"

Another important development appeared in Phạm Văn Đồng's report titled, "We Must Consolidate Our People's Republic Regime in Order to Counterattack and to Construct our Vietnamese People's Democratic Regime." Officially, the DRV government was a "democratic republic," but the establishment of the People's Republic of China two months earlier and the imminent arrival of the CCP advisor team seem to have convinced Thành that an expression of semantic conformity with Chinese models was expedient.

The theme of Đồng's report, approached from the angle of the government, was the same one addressed by Chinh and fellow Politburo member, Hoàng Quốc Việt: more aggressive use of the state as an instrument for enforcing party policies. According to Đồng, "The Vietnamese people's republican regime or, more specifically, the State of the Vietnamese People's Republic, is a dictatorship." As the vice-prime minister explained, the DRV state was a "dictatorship of the Vietnamese people against the French colonialists and Vietnamese traitors." The state was "determined to exterminate anything that harms the resistance war or harms Vietnamese independence."²³

This theoretical introduction amounted in practical terms to the "resolute implementation of a special legal regime" that would make possible the mobilization of "all human, material, and intellectual power."

Our resistance war is a revolutionary war, a people's war, but only now, after four years of war, have we decided to [implement this policy]. And it has been too late in coming. If we want to carry out a general counteroffensive, we must implement this special legal regime and maintain a policy of doing whatever is needed to guarantee the complete and prompt implementation of policies.²⁴

Đông's comment that radical new policies were "too late in coming" should be taken with a grain of salt. I doubt that the Politburo saw the shift to more radical policies as having come too late. More probably, the comment was inspired by the Politburo's anxiety over appearances. Radical policies had not been on the table immediately after seizing power because of a deliberate policy of concealing the Communist Party's dominant role in the DRV government.

Famine, Land Policy, and Party Impurity

In mid-March 1950, the head of the party Organization Bureau, Lê Văn Lương, released what appears to be the regime's first major statement on the growing problem of famine in regions of DRV control or, at least, DRV influence. Lương directed his notice at party leaders in five of the most heavily populated provinces of the Vietnamese North zone (Bắc Giang, Bắc Ninh, Thái Nguyên, Vĩnh Phúc, and Phú Thọ). He announced that the Central Committee was forming three delegations to visit these provinces and investigate the food shortage. "As a result of the purchase of rice [from peasants] at a fixed price, the collection of civil servant salary funds in rice, and the collection of land tax in rice, localities have met with many impediments and difficulties, and the price of rice is rising every day."²⁵

Lương acknowledged that the government's fixed-price rice purchases and rice requisitions for the DRV bureaucracy were a factor in local hardships. However, a couple of signs suggested that, one way or another, the party leaders intended to assign blame for local hardships anywhere other than on themselves and their policies. First, the formation of three special "inspection delegations" showed a desire to find causes at the local level. According to the notice, the primary task of these delegations was to "inspect documents related to the purchase of fixed-price rice." This implied that local party members had not implemented the policy correctly. Second, Lương insisted that these inspection cadres recruited by the Central Committee have a "clear class perspective," a

sign that the party leaders wanted the causes of famine to be blamed primarily on local elites.

A few days later, on March 21, 1950, Trường Chinh released a directive titled “On Protecting Against and Eliminating Famine.” Chinh began his order with a list of the five “main reasons” for the famine:

1. The French enemy have cut our supply roads, destroyed the harvest, burned rice, killed buffalos and cattle, etc. in those regions where they have carried out sweeps. They have also occupied parts of the delta that are densely populated and have a lot of rice.
2. Because of the war, some land has been left uncultivated. There is also a shortage of farm labor while the number of people whose jobs do not involve participating in production (such as the army, bureaucrats, cadres, etc.) has risen.
3. When the Government collects government salary tax [from the peasants], buys fixed-price rice, and collects tax in rice at 6%, the gang of hoarder-speculators hide their rice and then sell it to the people.
4. Recently, the weather has not been suitable for farming, lowering the productivity of grains.
5. Additionally, the amount of DRV money printed has been greater than the number of products sold on the domestic market, impacting to some extent the cost of living and especially the price of rice.²⁶

For the task of raising production, Chinh proposed that local cadres “research carefully the Government’s plan” and “set an appropriate plan” for their locality. A second measure was to devise another plan that focused on “motivating and inspiring” communities to “make the effort to compete with each other in friendly emulation” in implementing the production plan. Chinh also recommended that local cadres organize the “hiding of rice and the protection of the harvest in accordance with a careful plan.” And finally, he advised that local cadres continue to “push forward” the work of helping peasants raise production through such things as providing loans, distributing seeds, and helping with farm equipment. But these were all things that the party leaders had been instructing local cadres to do for the past three years.²⁷

Along with their military aid, the PRC began providing food aid to the DRV. This reflected a reality that would haunt Vietnam’s Communist leaders for the next thirty-seven years. They ruled an overwhelmingly agricultural population and yet desperately needed free food grown by the farmers of other nations. War

played an important role in this, but the food crises of the early 1980s would show that critically low agricultural productivity was simply a feature of their regime. According to the scholar Qiang Zhai, the Chinese shipped 2,800 tons of food to the DRV from April to September of 1950. This was enough to feed, over a six-month period, roughly 30,000 people or the equivalent of two military divisions. It appears, however, that this aid did little to stem the growing problem of agricultural production and hunger.²⁸

In October, the head of the party's Organization Bureau, Lê Văn Lương, issued a notice to party leaders of the four major zones, reminding them to implement the main points of the party's plan for "protecting the rice harvest." This was a task of "extreme importance and urgency." As Lương explained, "Winning this rice war with the enemy is to overcome a significant difficulty."²⁹ Perhaps thinking about all the mouths that the October rice harvest would have to feed, the party leaders began to look with concern on the size of the DRV bureaucracy. Lương released a directive titled "On the Task of Streamlining," in which he discussed measures to "lighten" the bureaucracy.³⁰

The previous month, he had called for the party to "temporarily stop" recruitment. Lương claimed that in 1948 and 1949, the party had inducted 500,000 new members, of which "many were loyal and enthusiastic." However, "a number were not worthy," lacking a "party consciousness" and a "class consciousness." According to Lương, the poor quality of cadres was evident in the disappointing results of "rent reduction, interest reduction, and temporary land distributions," all of which were supposed to boost agricultural production. A number of party members were "negative and passive, not implementing the Party's resolutions." Perhaps anticipating a future purge, he built on the existing narrative of saboteurs and spies having infiltrated the party's ranks: "There are even opportunistic elements who exploit the Party for their own benefit and, in a number of places, it has been discovered that enemy agents have wormed their way into the Party to sabotage it."³¹ The scapegoat narrative of local sabotage was growing.

Land Policy

The appearance of famine in several provinces surrounding the party headquarters of the Vietnamese North zone stimulated new discussion of rural policies. Why had they not produced better results? For example, why had the "land donation" campaign not raised production? In March 1950, Chinh recycled the same explanations that he had used to explain the poor results of other policies:

Local cadres had “not yet explained [the policy] thoroughly”; the mobilization was “still scattered”; cadres “lacked a continuous plan”; and they carried out the mobilization “in the wrong direction.”³²

Although the land donation campaign had achieved poor results, Chinh could not abandon the basic model of distributed land as a source of revenue for the DRV state: “Donated land needs to be used appropriately. Our policy is as follows: 1. Continue to have farm workers rent [the donated land], paying their rent to the state so that it can be added to public funds. The main land rent will be light, and all the supplementary rents will be abolished.”³³

Should the DRV go forward with large-scale land redistributions? Once again, Chinh insisted that addressing the “feudal task,” (i.e., land reform) must wait until after the war. The general secretary argued that landlords and rich peasants had suffered during the period of French-Japanese occupation during World War II and therefore still had something to contribute to the “anti-imperial task.” To those advocating an immediate move toward the expropriation and redistribution of all landlord property, Chinh argued:

They do not understand that confiscating the land of landlords in general and distributing it to the peasants will, at this time, not only weaken the Unified People’s Front against Imperialist Aggression and push the landlords over to the imperialist side, but it will also strike fear into the capitalists and rich peasants. The tasks of the resistance war and the construction of the country would be ruined.³⁴

Chinh affirmed that the “main goal” of the party’s land policy was still to implement the slogan “land to the tiller.” Ownership of land, being the “urgent desire” of the peasants, would inspire them to boost production. Why then, had the party’s “temporary distribution of land” policy not produced the expected boost in production?

The task of temporary distribution of land has been carried out slowly and carelessly. . . . When implementing the temporary land distributions, [cadres] at the local level have had many shortcomings. There are places where [local cadres] do not explain clearly to tenant farmers about the Party’s policy with respect to living on temporarily distributed land, resulting sometimes in peasants abandoning the land and leaving (as was the case in Tuyên Quang). There are places where, after land has been distributed, tenant farmers send hundreds of letters of complaint to the provincial, zone, and even to the Central Committee level. They do this because temporary land

distribution cadres do not have a spirit of impartiality [*công tâm*] and do not pay attention to the ideas of the poor (Bắc Giang). There are places where [local cadres] only distribute one part of the land, using the other part to create a farm [*trại nông*]. This sometimes involves forcing peasants who received temporarily distributed land to pool their land together into a cooperative, inspiring resentment among these peasants.³⁵

Local cadres received the brunt of the blame for problems with other policies as well. For example, in the recent general mobilization, cadres in many localities “lacked a careful plan,” assigned people for “official business” (i.e., working as a military porter) in a “sloppy” manner, or used manpower “inappropriately.” According to Chinh, these things “made life hard to bear for the people and negatively impacted production.” Indeed, “[i]nnumerable mistakes have damaged the policies of the Party and Government.”³⁶

Chinh was angry to learn that some local cadres were “carrying out a policy of permanent rather than temporary land distribution on the grounds that a temporary distribution did not satisfy the peasants, meaning that they do not enthusiastically increase production and participate in the resistance war.” The fault of the local cadres was that they did not “explain to the masses, making them understand that [temporary land distribution] is a victory made possible mainly by sacrifice and struggle.”

The general secretary reminded comrades that the party’s goal was to implement socialism, which meant “changing the way the peasants worked from a private and backwards method to a collective and progressive one.” According to Chinh, “[W]e not only give the peasants land, we encourage them and help them to organize into collectives. And down the road, we will help them to organize collective farms, supplying those farms with tractors and combines, making the peasants, as a result of the collective road, gradually progress to socialism.”³⁷ This was why the word “temporary” was attached to the land redistributions. Ultimately, Chinh and other party leaders hoped to eliminate private property, not build an agricultural sector based on small farmers.

Party Impurity

The narrative of party impurity also seems to have reached a turning point in January 1950. In explanations of poor cadre performance, class and espionage began to replace Thành’s eight common party-member “diseases” listed in his 1947 book, *The Way of Working*. Trường Chinh stated that the party now had 450,000 members. Even accounting for some exaggeration, this was

an amazing increase from the days of the August Revolution when the party probably had about 5,000 members. According to Chinh, the low percentage of “worker-peasants” in the party—supposedly only 8.7 percent—helped to explain current problems:

In many places, Party development has been carried out by method of “emulation” quota fulfillment, with new members accepted as a means of coping or because of personal relations. This has led to many complicated elements entering the Party. A number of rich peasants, former gentry, or the children of landlords, who do not yet have any consciousness about the interests of the workers, but did some work in their locality, have been accepted into the Party. As a result of that, in our mobilizations to lower rents and to report rice, to sell rice to celebrate and support the army, etc. etc., a number of party members, because of their own individual interest, have secretly sabotaged our Party’s policies.

This improper development has also led, in a few places, to spies slipping into the Party to sabotage us from within.³⁸

Fellow Politburo member Hoàng Quốc Việt made the same claim:

We must admit that our cadres suffer from the disease of empty politics and that the masses rarely see cadres bringing benefits to them. As a result, the masses are not enthusiastic about our organization and are haphazard in their activities. Cadres only mobilize people to make a contribution—one day it’s money, the next day it’s harvest support. The masses rarely receive anything that would help them materially or spiritually.³⁹

Hoàng Quốc Việt went on to explain the relationship between mobilization and class warfare, along with the role that the people would play in fixing what was allegedly wrong with local cadres. The upshot of this alleged situation was that a greater focus on “consolidating” rather than “expanding” the party would be needed in 1950. That consolidation would require careful inspection of the party’s ranks in order to “purge” members who were “undisciplined,” who “opposed the Party’s policies,” who were “opportunists,” or “provocateurs,” or “speculators.”

The complaints leveled by Chinh and Quốc Việt paint a picture of the DRV countryside as a place in chaos. According to them, local cadres were “giving orders,” “using state power,” and even “using government decrees to threaten” rather than focusing on “mobilizing, explaining, and persuading.” The reason for these and many other “mistakes,” according to Chinh, was that lower-level

party members “have little concern for the party’s policy of unifying the entire people to carry out the protracted resistance war,” “do not understand clearly the Party’s revolutionary strategy,” “do not aim at the main goal of developing production,” and “do not have a solid grasp of the mass perspective.” Assessing this general situation, Chinh claimed:

In many places, the party executive committees, the resistance committees, state bureaus responsible for rural issues, and the executive offices of mass organizations, remain complicated in composition, containing many landlord, village official, and rich peasant elements. Therefore, they often have a negative attitude, being indifferent to the interests of the peasant majority. But when implementing [rural policies], a number of their ranks take advantage in an opportunistic way, or they have a tendency to flatter the peasants, carrying out leftist deviations [*làm quá tả*].⁴⁰

Here was the class explanation for the difficulties in the countryside. This would steadily develop over the next three years, eventually becoming the foundation of the party’s land reform policy.

The Border Campaign and the Battle of Vinh Yen (October 1950 to January 1951)

In the summer of 1950, France’s intelligence services informed the military high command of the enormous boost in arms that China was providing to the DRV forces. This knowledge seems not to have changed French perceptions of their opponent’s capacity. Indeed, according to the historian Yves Gras, the primary concern of the French military establishment was the possibility of an invasion by Chinese Communist troops.⁴¹ Such an invasion would not occur, but Mao did send one of his top generals, Chen Geng, to work with Thành, Võ Nguyên Giáp, and other DRV leaders. Chen and Thành decided that they would use the DRV’s two newly created infantry divisions (now armed with Soviet weapons) to attack a vulnerable French fort about 200 kilometers northeast of Hanoi along the Chinese border. The fort was located at the town of Đông Khê, which lay along Colonial Route 4. This rugged and, at times, spectacular road followed the section of the Chinese border that extended in a north-south direction.

Đông Khê was the middle of three important French forts on the northern third of Route 4. About forty kilometers to the north of Đông Khê was the major French fort at Cao Bằng. About twenty-five kilometers to the south of

the middle fort was a smaller one at a town called Thất Khê. Chen and Thành planned to attack Đông Khê and wait to see how the French responded. This was the plan for the legendary “Border Campaign” (sometimes called the “Battle of Cao Bằng”) that would change the complexion of the war.⁴²

Despite their appraisal of the fighting capacity of their Vietnamese foes as being limited, the French military leaders had decided to abandon the strategy of attempting to track down and destroy the DRV forces in their mountain bases northwest of Hanoi. The head of France’s military forces in Indochina, General Marcel Carpentier, advanced a new strategy that focused on pacifying the “useful” parts of the Red River delta.⁴³ According to Christopher Goscha, the DRV leaders had learned of this new French plan by following discussions of military strategy in the French press.⁴⁴

For over a year, Carpentier and other French military leaders had wanted to abandon the three remote forts. Cao Bằng was especially hard to access and posed a significant drain on French resources. DRV forces had found the narrow, windy upper section of Route 4 where the three forts lay to be ideally suited to ambushes. At times, these ambushes became so deadly that the French were forced to divert large numbers of precious troops to carry out clearing operations along the route. This was the only way to keep the route passable for the long, vulnerable convoys that supplied these three forts. By the summer of 1950, the presence of DRV troops in that northeastern part of Tonkin had caused the French to rely almost exclusively on air transport for the resupply of Cao Bằng.⁴⁵

Carpentier and the French command had been concerned about the psychological impact (negative for their side and positive for the DRV side) of a withdrawal from Cao Bằng, the largest and most distant of the northern forts. Thus, the French found it difficult to proceed with the plan. Because of the base’s remote location, proximity to DRV forces, ample supply of valuable weapons, and large civilian community, all of whom would presumably need to be evacuated, the operation presented prohibitive logistical challenges. The worst-case scenario from the French perspective would involve DRV spies intercepting word of the planned evacuation, leading to an attack on a large, vulnerable convoy.⁴⁶

Chen Geng decided that the DRV attack on Đông Khê would begin on September 16, 1950.⁴⁷ As it turned out, this was also the day when Carpentier released his Special Order Number 46 calling for the abandonment of Cao Bằng and Đông Khê.⁴⁸ What Chen Geng and Võ Nguyên Giáp had not expected was the French command’s blasé response to the threat posed by the fall of Đông Khê. Carpentier assumed that the fort could be retaken from the DRV with relative ease by a single French battalion (1,300 troops) heading north from Thất

Khê, the southernmost of the three forts. On this assumption, Carpentier decided to continue with the evacuation of Cao Bằng.⁴⁹

The French response to the DRV attack on Đông Khê probably inspired a quick reformulation of plans on the part of Chen Geng and Vo Nguyên Giáp. Almost all of the various French mistakes during the battle were tied to their underestimation of the DRV troops' enhanced fighting capacity. A two-day delay in the departure of the French garrison at Cao Bằng provided more time for Chen and Giáp to bring the bulk of their troops to Route 4. Well-armed DRV forces were able to devastate not only the long convoy headed south toward them from Cao Bằng but also the undermanned French rescue columns heading north from the southernmost fort.⁵⁰ Within a couple of weeks, 7,000 French soldiers and civilians were either dead or captured, many having been ambushed along Route 4 or killed during terrible fighting in the thick mountain forests surrounding the road.⁵¹ Among the ranks of the captured were a French general and a colonel.

At the end of the battle, Thành sent Stalin a letter in English: "Dear Comrade Stalin, Am I right in regarding our success, though relatively minor, as part of great victory of revolutionary internationalism whose the most heroic and beloved leader you are?"⁵² As for Chen Geng, Thành invited him to summarize his impressions of the Border Campaign at a meeting held with top DRV commanders between October 27 and 30, 1950. Over a span of four days, the Chinese general addressed the DRV leadership, who were no doubt interested in his views of how the battle unfolded. But Thành and his comrades probably also understood the importance of flattering Chen and, by extension, the CCP leadership to keep crucial PRC aid flowing. Thành took the time to show his Stalin letter to Chen. And Giáp apparently made sure to tell the Chinese general that "the victory shows that Mao Zedong's military theory is very applicable to Vietnam."⁵³

The French Aftermath of the Border Campaign

Not surprisingly, the French disaster along Route 4 led to a profound crisis of morale in their camp. The DRV leadership, which appears to have begun the border campaign with the modest goal of taking one garrison, Đông Khê, and cautiously waiting to see what further opportunities the French response provided, suddenly saw signs of panic in their enemy.

Chen Geng, Thành, Giáp, Trường Chinh, Phạm Văn Đồng, and Luo Guibo (the lead Chinese advisor) must have been amazed to see the French execute a panicked evacuation of Lạng Sơn on October 18. This major town at the midway point of Route 4 (well south of the three forts) was guarded by five

French battalions (roughly 10,000 troops). DRV forces were not near enough to Lạng Sơn to pose a significant threat. Yet the French commander at the fort, infected like many others with a feeling of paranoia about the imagined power of the DRV forces in the area, called for the abandonment of the city. A few days later, when the DRV forces were finally able to reach this prize, which had been handed to them for free, they were able to take advantage of the garrison's enormous store of weapons, supplies, and food. The French had been in such a hurry to leave Lạng Sơn that they had decided to destroy their supplies by means of air bombardment, which proved ineffective.⁵⁴

On November 1, 1950, the French retreated from the forts in the region to the northwest of Hanoi in the border province of Lao Cai. This meant that the entirety of the Red River, from Việt Trì (about 85 kilometers northwest of Hanoi) to the Chinese border, was left to the DRV. On November 6, the French High Command decided to withdraw troops from the province of Hòa Bình, west of Hanoi, leaving the DRV with easy connection between the three key military zones of the North.⁵⁵ Meanwhile, the French leaders (Carpentier in particular) began to discuss the possible need to abandon Hanoi. Thành and the Politburo had good sources of information in Hanoi and would have been well informed about the French atmosphere of defeat in the city.

It was clear that General Carpentier's stint as commandant needed to be terminated. He was replaced on November 23 by General Latour, France's sixth military leader in Vietnam since 1945. When he arrived in Hanoi from the South, Latour saw what was surely reported to the DRV leadership: French residents selling all their belongings and preparing to leave the city. DRV spies also would have noticed that Latour had ordered seven mobile groups to be pulled from the Tonkin countryside and moved into the city—suddenly making it much easier for the DRV forces to move around the Red River delta. Another sign of the atmosphere of crisis and panic was Latour's order to create a special fortified zone in Haiphong. These moves were all in preparation for a possible emergency evacuation of Hanoi.⁵⁶

In my opinion, this crisis of morale on the French side combined with the immense economic difficulties on the DRV side left the party leaders with no real choice but to take a calculated risk. In these unusual circumstances, a furious military push toward Hanoi might lead the panicking French to abandon the city and perhaps concede northern Vietnam to the DRV. If the push were successful, it would retrospectively be called the "general counteroffensive." If not, it would merely be another important battle.

Had the French kept General Latour as the commandant for another couple of weeks, the DRV might have succeeded in their plan to push the reeling French into abandoning Hanoi. But that seems to have been staved off (barely) through a combination of luck and the remarkable efforts of the charismatic new French Commander-in-Chief, General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny. The French government had named him to the position on December 6, 1950; he arrived in Hanoi on the 19th.

The Battle of Vĩnh Yên: January 13–17, 1951

Thành, Giáp, Chinh, and Đông would give their new French adversary no time to get settled in Hanoi. After resting their victorious troops briefly in the wake of the Route 4 attack, Thành and his lieutenants formulated a new campaign to be named after the famous Vietnamese general, Trần Hưng Đạo (1228–1300), the basic outlines of which the French were able to learn from radio intercepts of DRV preparations. Essentially, the plan involved launching two divisions, the 308 and the 312, toward Hanoi from the vicinity of the Tam Đảo Mountains, roughly 50 kilometers to the northwest of the city.⁵⁷

At 1:30 a.m. on January 14, Giáp began the campaign by pushing his two divisions toward the major town of Vĩnh Yên, which lay only forty-five miles northwest of Hanoi. This was the first time DRV forces met the French in the open countryside. To meet the threat, General de Lattre sent 9,000 troops toward Giáp. After four days of fighting, the French were able to repel the DRV forces and hold Vĩnh Yên. Since de Lattre had used all his reserves in the fight, a DRV victory at Vĩnh Yên would have opened the door to Hanoi. Ultimately, the movement of large concentrations of DRV troops in open spaces had played to French strengths in artillery and airpower.⁵⁸

The Chinese Communists' Civil War victory, Soviet and Chinese recognition of the DRV, the flow of military aid to its People's Liberation Army, and the spectacular DRV victory in the Border Campaign changed the complexion of the war. Before 1950, the DRV had carried out some effective guerilla attacks, but mostly had focused on surviving until help from the Communist bloc arrived. During the early years of the war, it was the French who were the aggressors, trying to hunt down and eliminate their DRV foes. After 1950, the roles would be reversed, with France mostly trying to survive and the DRV attempting to win.

Military Stalemate and Rice-Field Decline: 1951–1952

In the wake of the dizzying events of late 1950 and early 1951—the spectacular victory over the French along the northeastern Chinese border in November followed by the tantalizing but costly near-miss with Hanoi in January—the DRV's party leaders finally were able to hold their long-anticipated Second Party Congress (*Đại hội Đảng*). It had been more than fifteen years since the ICP held the party's First Congress in 1935. Following this second congress, the party would abandon its semicovert status and officially introduce itself to the Vietnamese people and the world as the Vietnamese Workers' Party (VWP).

On the military front, the party leaders would push their People's Liberation Army to deliver war-ending blows. The French, however, under their inspiring new military leader, Jean de Lattre de Taussigny, would find their footing and punish the DRV forces for bolder moves into areas closer to the centers of French power. The contest evolved into a stalemate as both sides recognized their own and their opponents' strengths and weaknesses. For the DRV, forays into the Red River delta played to the French strengths (artillery and airpower). For the French, pushes toward the mountainous region of the Laotian-Vietnamese border played to the strengths of the DRV side (superior mobility over rough terrain). Both sides learned how to avoid the type of catastrophic defeat that would have swung the war dramatically in the opponent's favor.

Meanwhile, the economic struggles of the DRV continued to worsen. Talk of the need for an "inspection" of the countryside persisted. The official discourse about party impurity as an explanation for declining agricultural productivity continued to build. Perhaps inspired by their recently arrived Chinese Communist advisers, in 1951, the DRV leaders introduced a new method of taxation: the "agricultural tax" (*thuế nông nghiệp*). Also, in 1951, "thought reform" (*chỉnh huấn*), a policy promoted by Chinese advisers, became an official DRV policy.

The Second Party Congress: February 11–19, 1951

The party's Second Congress was held in February in the province of Tuyên Quang, about 200 kilometers north of Hanoi. The party leaders had been hoping to hold a congress since back in August 1948.¹ But how could Nguyễn Tất Thành have held a party congress without official diplomatic recognition from the USSR and without the participation of representatives from the Communist bloc?

The officially published materials for the Second Party Congress comprise 493 pages of the *Party Documents* series. These pages include twenty-one different documents: eight major reports, four resolutions, a new party program, party regulations, a party manifesto, and a handful of other opening and closing speeches and telegrams. There was a speech delivered by the "Representative of the Chinese Communist Party," who, we can assume, was Luo Guibo, the CCP's head advisor to the DRV. But his speech was not included in the official publication and, as far as I know, has yet to be read by any Western historian. Thành delivered the opening remarks of the Congress in a twenty-six page "Political Report." As usual, he put forward the Congress's major ideas, which were then developed in greater detail in eight reports delivered mostly by Politburo members.

The Second Party Congress was a landmark event for Vietnam's Communist movement in several ways. First, it saw the official reestablishment of the party as the Vietnamese Workers Party—this was the name that it would keep for the next twenty-five years. Second, the congress saw the election of a new Central Committee and Party Executive. Third, it saw the establishment of a new party newspaper, *The People* (Nhân dân), a name that Thành borrowed from the main organ of the Chinese Communist Party. Fourth, the congress made official the end of the Vietminh front, a move that had been in the works for months. This front organization was folded into the United Vietnam Association. Fifth, the congress saw the clarification of some of the party's regulations and ideological beliefs, expressed in three separate documents: "manifesto," "political platform," and "regulations." Sixth, the congress saw the establishment of an official party history.

And seventh, the Second Party Congress marked a turning point for the "Hồ Chí Minh personality cult." Since taking power in 1945, Thành had generally promoted "Hồ Chí Minh" as a folksy and courageous patriot who might have been vaguely connected to communism but who was, more or less, above

domestic politics. Now, with the party's official establishment and its decision to operate openly, Thành, with help from his lieutenants, had to adjust the character "Hồ Chí Minh" so that he was closer in form to the leaders of the other "People's Democracies."

The Fight for Control of Villages in the Tonkin Delta

In his history of the First Indochina War, Yves Gras signals 1951 as a year when the French leadership felt that the DRV had been able to make significant gains in extending their influence in the Red River delta. Particularly serious, in the French view, was what appeared to be a strong consolidation of DRV political power in a large triangular chunk of the delta southeast of Hanoi. The French devoted much time and effort to pacification, but these slow, cumbersome operations usually provided plenty of advance warning for DRV cadres to vacate a threatened area, only to return after the French troops had left. Judging from party appraisals of the situation in the countryside, though, these sweeps and other efforts by the French and the Bảo Đại government (the French-sponsored State of Vietnam) to establish a new political apparatus in the countryside were perhaps more successful than the French had imagined.²

In his long report at the Second Party Congress held in the February 1951, Trường Chinh spoke about areas "temporarily occupied by the French." As he often did, Chinh began his analysis with a general characterization that reflected the party's ideological commitments more than the reality on the ground. Thus, the French-controlled areas were places where the enemy "plundered, destroyed, killed, raped, and exploited" members of the local community. The "brutality" of the enemy was "not less than that of the German and Japanese fascists."³

Certainly, there were French troops who committed atrocities during their sweeps through Vietnamese villages. As the Vietnamese historian Đặng Phong explains, "the approach of the French government and military to people of the resistance forces was brutal and inhumane to the point of cruelty." However, "the attitude of French toward those regions under their control and especially toward those Vietnamese considered to be loyal was friendly and respectful to an extent seemingly never seen before during the entire history of French rule." Phong points out that the French charm effort involved such things as providing free medical treatment and even lending money to people who had recently come to French-controlled areas. Moreover, peasants who lived in French-controlled areas tended to have access to or to feel the beneficial effects of urban markets.⁴ In French-controlled areas, agricultural goods could be sold at market price

for piastres, a valuable and internationally recognized currency. The desire of peasants to sell their rice to the French troubled the DRV's leaders. As a party resolution from Zone 3 noted:

Recently, Party leaders at all levels have put forward as a serious issue the problem of resisting [French efforts] to destroy rice stores, and the people have shown a consciousness of the need to fight back against the enemy. But what is most worthy of our attention is the people's lack of concern about the enemy's efforts to throw money into rice purchases. On the contrary, the people still have the desire to bring over their rice and sell it [to the French] so that they, the sellers, can store the money or the gold more easily.⁵

Throughout 1951, the DRV leadership became increasingly concerned about the State of Vietnam's success in recruiting Vietnamese for an anticommunist army. The party leaders of Zone 4 (Central Vietnam), in a resolution released in October, described enemy successes in organizing armed "village defense" groups in Catholic areas of the province of Quảng Trị. Before, party leaders had characterized the organization of these "village defense corps" as something that had been "forced" upon the local inhabitants. Now the language had changed to recognize that "many elements" among the ranks of the State of Vietnam apparatus had "volunteered." As this section of the resolution concluded, "The organization of local defense corps is a success for the enemy in his competition with us for influence among the people." This success of the French and their Vietnamese ally, the State of Vietnam, "represents our greatest political failure, for places where there are local defense corps are places where the enemy has control over the people, where our base among the people has been slowly lost."⁶

An October 1951 resolution produced by party leaders of Zone 3 (North Vietnam) tells a similar story. The resolution describes French successes in carrying out its own "general mobilization" to recruit young people into the army in areas under its control. Weaknesses in the DRV efforts to resist this strategy had "made it easy for the enemy to impress into the army a large number of youths, with many villages seeing youths volunteer for the army in greater numbers than the enemy's recruitment targets."⁷ Why had the enemy been able to have this success in recruiting troops?

In the areas under [the enemy's] temporary control, they combine terror, killing, and continuous small-sized sweeps with schemes to entice and con [the people]. The enemy distributes milk, fabric, and medicine—they build

wells and they bribe the people, sweet-talking a few into surrendering and becoming traitors. The enemy forces cadres who have been arrested to write letters of appeal to the people and to comrades, instructing cadres to participate in sweeps and to dig up underground shelters. The enemy entices and bribes, intimidating the families of cadres, using their families to entice cadres into surrendering. The enemy sends spies into villages under their control to organize informers. They also send in the wives and children of puppet troops (Hà Nam) and use local school children to act as informers (Sơn Tây and a few Catholic areas). They combine the consolidation and development of the Nationalist Party to act as a loyal [organization] in the tasks of spying and informing. The enemy develops mass groups in order to steal the masses away from us. They develop Catholicism, organize the Buddhist League and the Cao Đài in order to pull these followers to them, in order to hypnotize the masses.⁸

Other efforts by the French and the Bảo Đại government included “distorting” the DRV’s battlefield victories, raising the prestige of the State of Vietnam government and of American aid in an effort to “split us from the democratic countries.” In other words, the French and the Bảo Đại regime were making a point of stressing the communist nature of the DRV regime and instilling a negative image of the Communist bloc countries. The French and the State of Vietnam called for people to concentrate their rice to prevent its use by DRV forces: “save [rice] for the people, resist the Vietminh’s efforts to steal it.”⁹

Yet the party’s assessments of the situation in the countryside also spoke of successes. One of the key goals of the recent Quang Trung campaign (May 1951, in the southeastern part of Tonkin Delta) had been to “win over” the people of this region. Among other things, this involved explaining the party’s policy to Catholic communities. “After the campaign, our Catholic countrymen understood our policy better and had more faith in us.” Apparently, part of these policy explanations involved assuring the parents of people who been arrested by the party that their sons and daughters were safe: “many people who made entreaties (*cầu khẩn*) about sons arrested by us, or people who had learned that their sons had been arrested, now have peace of mind and are happy.” According to the resolution, this had had a “big influence” on the party’s ability to rebuild its base in strongly Catholic areas such as Thái Bình, Bùi Chu, and Nam Định.¹⁰

As mentioned earlier, the DRV leadership’s methods of consolidating its power in villages, especially those whose loyalty was in doubt, usually combined vigorous propaganda with “anti-traitor” measures that frequently involved the

execution of community members identified as having cooperated with the French or with the State of Vietnam. Normally the party leaders were careful to be discreet in their official documents about what “anti-traitor” efforts involved. But occasionally they wrote more explicitly. An order from the Party Secretariat in January 1952 focused on ways of consolidating political control in areas of the North:

The elimination of traitors and the liquidation of puppet officials [trừ gian diệt tể] must be done with determination except in those places where the movement is weak, forcing us to leave some form of the puppet administration intact. Where the movement is reasonably strong, the masses should be mobilized to carry out [the elimination of traitors and the liquidation of the puppet administration].

What is most needed is not to be mechanical but to recognize the advantageous situation right now. [Cadres] should not just follow the old methods, not daring to boldly act and thereby allowing the enemy time to consolidate. Naturally, a tendency toward leftist deviation with lots of indiscriminate killing [*giết bừa*] also needs to be avoided so as not to create an atmosphere of terror among the people.¹¹

These executions of alleged “traitors” were probably effective measures for consolidating control over a community. Yet they may have made it difficult to gauge the actual sentiments of the people.

The Battle of Hòa Bình: November 23, 1951—February 8, 1952

Since his arrival in Vietnam in December 1950, General de Lattre had found himself on the defensive. The battle of Vĩnh Yên (January 1951), along with three subsequent battles in March, May, and October of 1951 were all engagements forced upon the French by DRV forces, who now had the initiative in the war. De Lattre longed to reverse this situation and was intrigued by the notion of a major operation in Thanh Hóa province (south of the Red River delta). This large, densely populated province had been an important source of men and rice for the DRV since the beginning of the war, and the French had never attempted to challenge the DRV presence there. To pacify Thanh Hóa would have the appearance of a major new advance.¹²

In de Lattre’s mind, a precondition for the investment of Thanh Hóa province was the establishment of French control in the large, sparsely populated province to its north, Hòa Bình. This province to the southwest of Hanoi was

an important transportation hub for the DRV forces. It connected sectors in the northern part of the country with those in Laos and Central Vietnam. The rough mountainous terrain of Hòa Bình and its distance from Hanoi made it a battlefield that played to the strengths of the DRV forces.

In de Lattre's thinking, these factors might tempt the DRV forces into engaging in a major battle, providing the French with an opportunity to deliver a painful blow. Though the terrain was favorable to the DRV, de Lattre calculated that, in the final analysis, Hòa Bình province was still close enough to Hanoi (sixty kilometers) to be accessed by fighter bombers operating from the city. Also, unlike Route 4 (the 1950 Border Campaign), Hòa Bình province was accessible by water, giving French forces more flexibility for resupply, fire support, and evacuation of wounded. For these reasons, de Lattre sent 15,000 troops into the province during the first week of November 1951.¹³

The basic reasons for de Lattre's investment of Hòa Bình were not lost upon Thành, Trường Chinh, Phạm Văn Đồng, and Võ Nguyên Giáp. On November 24, 1951, in a directive titled "The Task of Wrecking the Enemy's Attack on Hòa Bình," Đồng provided VWP members with a brief analysis of the situation:

The enemy has decided to invade Hòa Bình in order to:

1. Cut our transport and communication link between the Vietnamese North to other regions to the south.
2. To ensure their defensive line in the southwest of the North's mid-land region.
3. Occupy a strategic position connecting Hanoi with the Northwest region where they have, for a while now, been isolated. [The occupation of Hòa Bình] will also help them to threaten Thanh Hóa.
4. Increase their area of occupation, establish a political base in the Mường region, expand the scope of their policy of making war to support war, of using the Vietnamese to fight the Vietnamese.
5. Create political influence with the Americans and the British and create reactionary public opinion [in support] of the puppet government.¹⁴

Đồng explained that the enemy's plan to occupy Hòa Bình would "naturally create many difficulties" for the DRV forces in their transportation from the Vietnamese North region to more southerly regions. The French move would also create difficulties for the DRV on the military, economic, and political fronts. "Faced with that situation, a few people and a few of our cadres have shown

themselves to be perplexed and worried because they have yet to recognize clearly the fierce nature of this period of our resistance war's second stage."¹⁵

But, as de Lattre had expected, the DRV leadership also saw in the French campaign an opportunity to attack in favorable conditions. *Đổng* pointed out in his directive that "we must clearly recognize the enemy's weak points and difficulties right now in Chợ Bến and Hòa Bình." First, the campaign in Hòa Bình forced the French to "spread its attack units out along a wide front in a mountainous and jungle-covered region full of obstacles." Moreover, the DRV leaders estimated that the French had not yet had time to consolidate their positions through the construction of defense installations. The second weakness of the French position in Hòa Bình province was that it drew forces away from the Red River delta, providing good opportunities for the DRV to strike the enemy "behind his back, [. . .] especially on the left [i.e., northeastern] side of the Red River."¹⁶

Accepting the challenge posed to them in Hòa Bình, the DRV leaders changed their original plans of channeling all their forces into the Red River delta. In late November, three DRV infantry divisions began making their way toward the province. In the two-month struggle over Hòa Bình, DRV forces scored some early successes, taking advantage of their superior mobility in the region's rough terrain to inflict heavy damage on patrolling French units. During the month of December, French forces suffered 108 killed, 296 missing, and 394 wounded. In the engagements where the French had been successful, they counted 1,100 enemy dead left on the battlefield. How many were wounded the French could not estimate.¹⁷

Toward the end of December 1951, the DRV leaders decided to strike against the two most isolated French posts in Hòa Bình province. The first was small but well-defended. Goscha has pointed out the parallels between the type of fighting in WWI and in the First Indochina War, especially from the perspective of the DRV side.¹⁸ With their human wave approach and their lack of heavy artillery to weaken well-defended targets, the DRV troops sometimes suffered terrible losses. An unsuccessful attack on the first post (December 31–January 1) left its French defenders the gruesome task of removing 160 Vietnamese corpses stuck in the surrounding barbed wire.

Though the losses at the nearer post were heavy, *Giáp* remained determined to destroy the much more heavily defended post of Xóm Pheo, just two kilometers to the west of the smaller post. This meant amassing four battalions for the attack (6,000 to 8,000 men). The post at Xóm Pheo was defended by a battalion

of the French Foreign Legion whose members had had time to construct a well-thought-out defense structure. With four heavily armed strongpoints strategically placed around the base, the Foreign Legion battalion was well prepared.

On the night of January 7–8, the DRV forces launched their attack. All through the night, Giáp sent wave after wave of troops at the isolated post of Xóm Pheo, determined to “annihilate” it rather than just “attrite” it. But, as in World War I, the overwhelming advantage went to the defenders who, with superior fire power, blew apart the waves of men coming at them. The legionnaires were able to hold the post at Xóm Pheo, eventually forcing the DRV troops to retreat in the early morning, “followed by lines of coolies evacuating the wounded on bamboo stretchers.” The presence of over 800 Vietnamese corpses in the vicinity of the post gave the area the look of a “mass grave” the following day.¹⁹

A few days after the French had stabilized the situation in Hòa Bình, their generals decided to withdraw from the province. Maintaining their presence required too many troops, which were badly needed for pacification work in the Red River delta. Also, the DRV leaders were no longer willing to engage with the French in Hòa Bình. This meant that France’s occupation of the province no longer provided opportunities to destroy great numbers of DRV troops in large-scale battles. On February 22, the French pulled out of the province.

The Agricultural Tax

At the Second Party Congress in February 1951, the party leaders had announced their intention to abandon the policy of “general mobilization” and its use of (valueless) DRV money to purchase rice from the people at “fixed prices.” As we saw, this system had generated famine in the party leadership’s backyard of the Vietnamese North. The inflationary pressure on the DRV’s currency caused by the regime’s need to print money for rice purchases was surely enough on its own to render the currency worthless. Probably frustrated by the uncertainty of their earlier tactics for extracting rice, the party leadership decided to standardize this crucial process.

On May 1, 1951, Thành put his “Hồ Chí Minh” signature on Government Decree 13, which officially ushered in the era of the “agricultural tax” (*thuế nông nghiệp*).²⁰ The decree had five clauses:

Clause 1:

In order to guarantee adequate supply for the resistance war, to develop agricultural production, to unify and simplify for the people their [tax]

contribution, and to make the people's tax contribution fair, from this 1951 harvest tax onward, [the Government shall]:

1. Abolish agricultural contributions to the National budget and to local funds such as: land tax, rice for government employees, [rice for] people's literacy classes, rice for supporting local militias, rice for the subdistrict fund, rice for road construction . . .
2. Abolish fixed-price rice purchases.
3. Establish an agricultural tax that is collected in rice, the quantity of which will be calculated according to a piece of land's harvest in normal years.

The agricultural tax will be submitted by the person who brings in the yield. In addition to the agricultural tax, a few extra percentage points will be collected for the local Budget. Besides these two taxes, there will be no other contributions required of a land's yield.

Clause 2:

The regulation for setting the agricultural tax will be set in a subsequent decree.

Clause 3:

While waiting for the promulgation of this regulation, the Government will borrow some rice from the people during the 1951 May harvest to help the national Budget. The amount of rice borrowed will then be deducted from the forthcoming agricultural tax. If the amount borrowed exceeds the tax level, the Government will return the difference. If the amount is less than the tax level, then the people will have to submit the difference. In addition to the amount of tax borrowed for the National Budget, the Government will borrow for Local Budget a quantity of rice not to exceed 20% of the rice borrowed for the National Budget.

Signed

Hồ Chí Minh

Thus the DRV's agricultural tax involved assigning households an estimated yield based on land ownership. From that estimated yield, the government would take a set percentage of the harvest. In theory, this agricultural tax was supposed to motivate households to produce more. Because the tax burden was based on the government's yield estimate, a family that outproduced the estimate would pay a smaller percentage of the harvest to the state and keep for themselves a larger total quantity of rice. The family that produced less than the government

estimate would be punished by having to hand over a greater percentage of their harvest and keep for themselves a smaller total quantity of rice. Obviously, the party leaders hoped that this carrot-and-stick approach would motivate peasants to produce more.

Normally, the *Party Documents* series reflects a spike in agriculture-related directives and circulars around the time of the two harvests each year in May and October. The volume for 1951 does not contain from the year's last two months any directives that shed light on the results of the October harvest and how the collection of taxes had gone. It appears from a directive of the party Secretariat released three months later on January 21, 1952 that the harvest and tax collection had been difficult again. The directive, which was sent to the party heads of northern Vietnam's three major zones, began by stating that "agricultural tax work (collecting the tax and carrying out the post-tax debrief) has been too slow." What was responsible for this slowness were "the weaknesses of cadres, organization, and the [interzone] leadership." The directive listed tasks for interzone party leaders to "implement with determination." One of the most important concerned the collection of taxes:

1. *Tax collection:* The collection of taxes by the Interzones must be basically finished before February 1952. For those places that still have not completed the tax collection by that deadline, the Interzone Party leaders need to set a plan and send a capable cadre to help complete the task in the first ten days of February. [You] must focus on those places that still need to collect a lot of rice or places that especially need help (for example: [places that have] not yet set their yields at the right level).²¹

With respect to the "capable cadres" sent to "slow" or "difficult" communities, it is likely that the infamous visiting cadre in the writer Võ Văn Trức's historical novel, *A Village Story Back Then*, provides an accurate example. Trức wrote about his own village's experience of tax collection in the province of Nghệ An during 1952.²² As Trức's account shows, a local cadre who needed to have a "capable cadre" sent to "help" him collect the agricultural tax could be in serious trouble. (In the story, the visiting cadre tosses the local party leader in jail under brutal conditions.)

In March, Thành decided to mobilize another "production and economization movement," which focused on encouraging peasants to devise a "*production and economization plan*." This was needed to ensure that the resistance war could be carried out "for a long time."

In order to implement a production and economization plan, we need to create a deep and enduring *mass movement*. We need to propagandize, mobilize, organize, and lead the people to enthusiastically participate in the work of establishing a plan and implementing it. We must make the production and economization movement the central focus of the *patriotic emulation movement*. Every locality, every unit, every family should all *sign a contract* to compete with each other in implementing their own production and economization plan as a means of completing the general plan of the Government.²³

This latest patriotic emulation movement was to end on Hồ Chí Minh's birthday, May 19, which was also the anniversary of the founding of the Vietminh front. As in the past, the party leaders wanted May 19 to be an occasion when the "entire party and people expressed their faith in and gratitude toward Hồ Chí Minh and the cause of the Vietminh-United Vietnam front." In practical terms, this meant that the entire party had to "study Hồ Chí Minh's morality and work ethic, to zealously reform their thinking, and to study politics to serve the people."²⁴

The directive instructed local cadres to mobilize units and individuals to send letters and telegrams reporting their accomplishments in the emulation campaign and wishing Hồ Chí Minh a happy birthday. Again, the party leaders were not willing to take the chance that people would send these letters and telegrams on their own initiative. On this occasion, the party leaders also wanted a collection of Chairman Hồ's writings and a biography of his life to be produced. The directive instructed DRV newspapers to release a "special issue" and to "[r]emember to post excerpts from the people's letters and telegrams sent to Chairman Hồ." Cadres were to use a few different slogans to accompany the mass movement. Three focused on Hồ Chí Minh and were probably written on banners: (1) "The entire people are grateful to Chairman Hồ." (2) "Follow Chairman Hồ's model of hard work, sacrifice, honesty, and selflessness." (3) "Chairman Hồ forever!"²⁵

"Thought Reform" and the Party Purge

With the arrival of Chinese advisors to the DRV's party headquarters came pressure to adopt Maoist revolutionary policies. One of the earliest and most important of those was "thought reform" (*chỉnh huấn*), sometimes referred to as "rectification" in Western scholarship. "Thought reform" began in the summer of 1951 and was initially a method of ideological instruction used in the military.

In that milieu, the purpose was to improve the fighting capacity of soldiers. A “thought reform” guidebook written in the summer of 1951 explains that, for the purpose of “cadres” (i.e., officers), the reform aimed to “raise the organizational and command capacity.” With this military element came a political one aimed at “strengthening a cadre’s understanding of world events (*thời sự*), improving organizational discipline, and instilling a spirit of independent and zealous action when working.” For regular soldiers, the program had a practical and ideological component. The first focused on improving soldiers’ knowledge of how to use weapons. The second, “political” component, aimed at “strengthening [soldiers’] correct understanding of the democratic regime in the military” and “improving each person’s consciousness and zealous spirit.”²⁶

About ten months later, in March of 1952, the Politburo decided to carry out a much larger program of thought reform that would be a part of a “Party reorganization” (*chỉnh Đảng*). The program would be applied primarily to DRV bureaucrats and intellectuals. As Thành explained in his opening remarks at a Central Committee plenum held from April 22 to 28, “Through reorganizing the Party the Party receives training. We reorganize and strengthen our ranks in order to carry out protracted resistance war and to prepare enough forces for a general counter-offensive.”²⁷ Thành put “thought reform” and the party reorganization (a euphemism for “purge”) in the hands of the aforementioned Politburo member (officially a “candidate member”), Lê Văn Lương. Since the Second Party Congress in February of 1951, Lương had served as head of the party’s Organization Bureau. In a front-page article published in the party newspaper, *The People*, Lương explained that the purge was “a task of building and consolidating our Party according to the method of Mao Zedong . . .” That Maoist method focused on “ideological development,” with the primary instrument being “criticism/self-criticism.”²⁸

As was typical of the discourse of the party leaders, the justification for the purge focused on a list of “mistakes” that officials and party members had committed to the alleged detriment of the “correct” policies of the party leaders. “Because they lack a firm political view and class perspective, many cadres and party members have lacked a spirit of absolute and unyielding struggle for the revolutionary cause.” Other sins included “inability to distinguish between the enemy, friends, and us;” “being distant from the masses;” “being distant from reality;” “suffering from the disease of corruption and waste;” and having an “unclear conception of democracy and discipline in the Party.” Lương then described some of the difficulties that lay ahead for the DRV, especially having to fight a protracted

war. “If our Party . . . does not eliminate the above mistakes and weaknesses in the thinking of cadres and party members, implementation of the Party and Government’s policies in the coming period will meet many obstructions.”²⁹

In a speech that Lương delivered before the Central Committee’s “thought reform class,” he was more explicit:

The experience of the Chinese Communist Party teaches us that: if we want to build our Party correctly, if we want to Bolshevize our Party, to make party cadres grasp the basic theories of Marxism-Leninism, we need to strengthen our education. Primarily that is ideological education by means of thought reform.

The primary theme of “thought reform” was “petit-bourgeois thinking.” Here Thành and Lương pointed out that over ninety percent of the party’s ranks, which they claimed to total 700,000 members (probably an exaggeration), came from either the peasant or petit-bourgeois class. “Though they entered the Party, received education to some extent, and have made some efforts, they have not yet scrubbed themselves clean of their petit-bourgeois thinking.” According to Lương, the “serious mistakes” committed by party members “were basically the result of a petit-bourgeois consciousness.”³⁰

As was the case in China, “thought reform” involved pushing individuals to confess to various instances of petit-bourgeois thinking. The point was to confess to some sort of crime, thereby affirming the party leadership’s picture of DRV-controlled areas as full of potential traitors and saboteurs. After the “thought reform” session, each student had to write down a self-confession, which would then be placed in the person’s file. For the party leaders, having the self-confessions of rank-and-file party members generated leverage over them. In his history of the First Indochina War, Goscha mentions an example of a “thought reform” program that dealt with 4,000 cadres. Every single participant ultimately confessed to either having “worked for the enemy” or having had “past relations with him.”³¹ The DRV intellectual Vũ Thư Hiên remembered “thought reform” as a “sorcerer’s spell . . . that paralyzed a person’s sense of perception, creating a laziness of thought to the highest degree, removing all ability to resist, turning a person into a Party robot who knows only loyalty to the Party.”³²

The CCP Advisor Luo Guibo's Preliminary Land Reform Program

One of the most interesting questions about the DRV is the nature of its relationship with the CCP and Soviet Union. How much control did the head Chinese advisor, Luo Guibo have over DRV operations? On this question, the scholar Alex Thai Vo uncovered in the Hanoi archives one of the most revealing documents. Written by Luo on September 3, 1952, the document is titled “Preliminary Ideas about Mobilizing the Masses, 1953.” Luo sent a copy of it to Trường Chinh, who then passed a copy to Thành and probably to other members of the Politburo.

What is remarkable about Luo's document is that it provides instructions about how the DRV should begin a land reform campaign—instructions that Thành and Trường Chinh seem to have followed closely “from inception to fulfillment.”³³ Particularly revealing is Luo's final paragraph:

Prepare teams of cadres to carry out an experimental run [of land reform] in order to gain experience, then carry out criticism. The Central Committee should prepare twenty teams of [land reform] cadres. In the Vietnamese North and in Zone 4, choose ten subdistricts to carry out this test run.³⁴

The DRV leaders would end up choosing six subdistricts in the Vietnamese North and six in Zone 4. As Alex Vo argues, Luo's September 3, 1952 policy statement appears to have formed a “template” for the DRV's mass mobilization campaign. His document outlines many of the campaign's important elements such as the ideological justification, the propaganda campaign, the accompanying party purge, and the use of land reform to boost tax collection.

The question that Luo's document does not answer is whether his “ideas” about mass mobilization were received by Thành and Trường Chinh as an order that had to be implemented. In other words, does his letter's date, September 3, 1952, signal the beginning of the move to land reform? This is Vo's interpretation. I suspect that Chinh sent Luo's document to “Uncle” (Thành) wondering whether he would approve the proposal or not. I believe that Thành's policy up to that point had been to appease Mao by lavishing praise on him as a theorist and by implementing many CCP policies in the DRV—the agricultural tax, thought reform, removal of “landlords” from mass organizations in the countryside—except land reform. Even in September of 1952, Thành probably still hoped to follow Lenin's classic two-stage formula of expelling the imperial

power first and carrying out major socialist transformation subsequently. I believe that it was Thành's Moscow meeting with Stalin in October (see next chapter) that marked the beginning of the DRV's campaign of mass mobilization through land reform.

Trouble with the 1952 October Rice Harvest Tax Collection

The approach of the October rice harvest, as usual, stimulated party directives on tax collection, which often included appraisals of the recent May harvest. According to an August 28 directive written by Trường Chinh, "In its agricultural tax work for the 1951 October harvest and the 1952 May harvest, all inter-zones had major shortcomings: under-collection, slow collection, and failure to complete the job. This has hindered the Government's plan to balance the budget and had a negative political influence among the people."³⁵

As usual, the problems with the agricultural tax stemmed from the people responsible for implementation:

The main reasons for these shortcomings are as follows: the responsible offices and cadres do not yet understand the importance of collecting the agricultural tax. They lack a sense of discipline, of organization, and responsibility. They do not yet have a grasp of the policy and the means. They lack leadership and do not command in a concrete and timely manner. A number of cadres implement the policy and its methods incorrectly for their own personal interest.³⁶

Chinh decided that local cadres should raise the yield levels from which the agricultural tax percentage was to be taken. "Because many places carried out incorrectly the agricultural inspection to determine yields (generally speaking, they are too low), we now have to adjust them." Adjusting the agricultural yields, Chinh explained, would help give the peasants "peace of mind" and inspire them to "enthusiastically pay attention to production."

Only a few sentences after stating that adjusting the yield levels (upward) was going to bring the peasants "peace of mind," Chinh candidly acknowledged that this task would be "difficult" and that cadres would need to "endure hardships" in convincing peasants to raise their yield levels. "Cadres must propagandize and explain thoroughly so that the peasants understand; they must also mobilize the masses to participate in democratic discussion." After the yield levels had been adjusted upward, cadres were to create "tax books" based on that new level and collect the amount in the book.

During the 1952 October harvest, one interesting new twist that was certain to make tax collection more difficult was the Politburo's decision to collect money as well as rice. The collection of money was not a substitute for the collection of rice—it was an extra tax added to the agricultural tax. The DRV leaders were determined to “balance their budget” and raise the value of their badly inflated currency. By requiring that peasants pay an additional tax in DRV dollars, the government could reduce the supply of this currency and hopefully bring its value back up.

When the party had carried out its “fixed-price purchases” of rice in the earlier years of the war, it had used nearly worthless DRV money and demanded that peasants sell their rice to the state at prices lower than market value. Now that the party leaders were collecting the money, they became interested in obtaining market value for it. “In the task of collecting money, the price must be set closely to that of the currency's market value and careful inspections must be organized to avoid corrupt practices.”³⁷

With tax rates set at a certain level of the peasants' yield, the collection of taxes should have been able to proceed based on that rate, with the amount that the state collected dependent only on the productivity of the peasants. But it appears that the party leaders were determined not to have peasants and weather determine how much rice they collected:

The tax for the 1952 October harvest will be collected one part in rice and one part in money. The Ministry of Finance will work with [the leaders of] each interzone to set the amount of rice and money to be collected in each interzone. These set amounts will be based on the potential of each interzone. The interzone level leaders will then meet with provincial leaders to set the amount of rice and money to be collected in each province. The provincial leaders will do similarly with district leaders, and district leaders with subdistrict leaders. [Those responsible for tax collection] absolutely may not use authoritarian bureaucratic methods of collection as was the case before. With the rate having been determined *on a solid basis and in a democratic manner*, local cadres must *resolutely implement [that rate]*. It is an issue of responsibility and discipline.³⁸

Chinh provided no explanation for why a tax system theoretically based on set percentages of agricultural yields needed to have collection quotas. Why not simply follow the established rate? To set collection quotas, no matter how closely they were tied to “potential,” gave the operation the smell of a giant rice and money requisition program. In light of this, it is perhaps understandable

why Chinh concluded his directive with “Chairman Hô’s” words of advice about how cadres should approach the agricultural tax: “The agricultural tax is a campaign. We must concentrate our forces and try to exceed the goal so that we can bring the campaign to victory.”³⁹

To pressure cadres into delivering the agricultural tax, the party leaders decided to make virtually the entire DRV apparatus involved in tax collection carry out “self-criticism” (*kiêm thảo*) for their allegedly poor performance during the previous two harvests. After comrades at all levels had carried out self-criticism, it would be the turn of non-party members who sat on the executive boards of mass organizations or who were members of local people’s committees. After these self-criticisms had been performed internally, first within the party itself, then within state organizations, they were to be performed in front of the people.

These self-criticisms must be performed before the people to give prominence to the *democratic working style* of the people’s democratic state. [This should allow] the people to inspect the work of the state, making them recognize clearly that the state belongs to the people and works for the people. This will make the people enthusiastic, inspiring them to carry out zealously their responsibility to pay their tax at the right level and at the right time.⁴⁰

In keeping with the stage-managed character of this exercise, the party leaders determined what things cadres throughout the apparatus were to apologize for and reminded them not to deviate from the issue at hand, which was the “clear recognition of weaknesses in the handling of the agricultural tax.” For individual cadres who performed self-criticisms before the people, this was to be managed by their superiors in the party, based primarily on the content of the government’s circular on the agricultural tax, and focused mostly on “self-serving” behavior and “failure to set a good example.”

Since a higher-ranking cadre from the outside was to “help closely” in the self-criticisms carried out at the local level, it would appear (or was supposed to appear) that superiors in the party and state were not responsible for negative phenomena at the local level. A more detailed explanation of this self-criticism operation written by the party leaders of Zone 4 instructed that higher-ranking cadres overseeing local self-criticisms probe the people’s aspirations and “arrange” [*bố trí*] the discussions accordingly. If, during the discussion, a local cadre “starts to go off topic, [the Party member leading the self-criticism] needs to figure out how to guide that person back onto the right track without interrupting

him in a mechanical way.” Such an action would “diminish the spirit of struggle” of those involved, and it would mean that “democracy was not guaranteed.”⁴¹

Battle for Nà Sản: Autumn 1952

In June 1952, French intelligence noted a spike in the Molotova truck traffic along the route from Cao Bằng in the northeast of Tonkin across to the western part of the Red River delta. This, along with the subsequent assembly of four DRV divisions in the western part of Tonkin and 20,000 “people’s porters” to the north of Phú Thọ (western Tonkin) seemed to indicate a coming DRV attack on the “Tai country,” as the French labeled it.⁴² The “Tai Country” was a mountainous region populated mostly by Tai ethnic minority people. Overlying a large chunk of the western part of Tonkin and the eastern part of northern Laos, this transnational region’s focal point was the border town of Điện Biên Phủ. The mountainous region played to the strengths of the DRV forces.

On September 13, 1952, anticipating attacks on French posts along the main road leading west from Hanoi toward the Lao border at Điện Biên Phủ, the French decided to reinforce two of the most important posts (Nghĩa Lộ and Nà Sản). The latter of the two, Nà Sản, had the only airport in the province (Sơn La) where the attack was unfolding, giving the post strategic importance for the French.

On the following day, September 14, the DRV began to approach the more distant post of Nghĩa Lộ with three divisions. Three days later, the DRV’s 308th Division began the attack with the customary mortar barrage followed by human wave assaults. The fighting carried on through the evening and into the early morning, lit by a steady stream of flares dropped by circling French airplanes. The soldiers fought under this lurid illumination until about 3 am, when fog compelled the airplanes to abandon the effort. By 8 am, the DRV forces were masters of the French garrison at Nghĩa Lộ.⁴³

Over the next three weeks, the French focus turned to the second of these two garrisons, Nà Sản. There, they decided to create an “entrenched camp” that would seem weak enough and isolated enough to tempt the DRV command to attack but which would be constructed and armed well enough to repel a large force. The French would need four or five weeks to create such a camp. With DRV divisions only days away, Nà Sản could come under attack before the preparations were complete. To avoid such an eventuality, the French command created an elaborate diversionary campaign, which successfully kept DRV troops away while construction of the “entrenched camp” at Nà Sản proceeded.⁴⁴

From late October through to late November 1952, the French forces worked feverishly to ready Nà Sãn for the coming attack. Most of the material was flown into the base on DC-3 cargo planes. During daylight hours, the base's airstrip received a new load roughly every six minutes. By November 23, Nà Sãn had about 12,000 troops. Over the preceding weeks, the base had been supplied with 1,100 tons of barbed wire and 5,000 mines along with heavy artillery pieces, vehicles, tools, engines, etc. French soldiers at the base cut down most of the trees on the nearby hillocks and created ten defensive strongpoints. Surrounded as they were by DRV divisions, the French troops at Nà Sãn well understood that their lifeline was the airstrip—it needed to be defended at all costs.⁴⁵

The DRV leaders do not appear to have appreciated fully the measures taken by the French command to fortify Nà Sãn. Toward the end of November, after a few days of DRV attacks on French posts at the very outer edges of the entrenched camp, Võ Nguyên Giáp moved troops in place for an attack on two key hillocks overlooking the base. If these could be taken, the DRV troops would then have a direct line of fire at the airstrip and a good chance of cutting the base off from its primary means of supply. In such a scenario, the French forces could be compelled to retreat along Route 6 where the DRV forces had prepared to carry out lethal ambushes.⁴⁶

On October 25, about a month before the assault on Nà Sãn began, the party leaders sent a message to a meeting of cadres associated with the “Northwest Front” (i.e., Sơn La province). The message praised the military for initial successes in the campaign, which included “destroying many of the enemy’s forces” and “liberating compatriots in a large area of the northwest.” Why had the army enjoyed these successes? According to the letter, DRV military leaders had “[a]bsorbed the resolve of the Party Central Committee, the Government, and Chairman Ho, and made that resolve become the resolve of the soldiers and people.”⁴⁷

On the night of November 30, Giáp began the attack. Initially, his troops succeeded in taking the two strategic highpoints. A counterattack organized by the French forces dislodged the DRV troops from the first highpoint by daybreak but failed to retake the second. However, as daylight set in, the French were able to reverse the DRV gain on the remaining second high point thanks in large part to intense aerial bombing (cluster bombs and napalm) on the exposed DRV position.

For the next three nights, Giáp threw his troops at Nà Sãn, with fighting always taking place at night under the light of flairs dropped by circling airplanes. But the “entrenched camp” held against the onslaught, inflicting terrible losses

on the DRV troops. On December 3, Giáp called off the attack and began preparations to withdraw his three divisions.⁴⁸ To be able to overthrow a garrison such as Nà Sản, the DRV troops needed heavy artillery, something they did not have at the time. Roughly a year later, though, the French would construct another “entrenched camp” deep in DRV territory with the intention of again tempting the party leaders into another costly attack. But this time, in the valley of Điện Biên Phủ, the DRV forces would have the heavy artillery they needed. And the outcome would be different.

The Move to Land Reform: 1952–1953

At some point in September 1952, Nguyễn Tất Thành departed the party's base area in the Vietnamese North and began the long journey to Beijing. On September 30, shortly after arriving in the PRC capital for discussions about the progress of the war, he sent a cable to Stalin requesting permission to attend the upcoming 19th CPSU Congress, which was scheduled to begin on October 9. It had been almost thirteen years since Stalin had held a party congress, so Thành may have felt that such an occasion had a special importance. Among other things, attendance would give him access to Communist leaders from around the world, providing an opportunity to promote the cause of the DRV.

But, as the historian Ilya Gaiduk points out, surely the primary goal of Thành's visit to Moscow was, as stated in his telegram, to meet with Stalin himself. This would provide the DRV leader with the opportunity to shore up Stalin's support, and, if possible, convince him to increase Soviet aid. The People's Liberation Army could then hope to achieve a decisive, war-ending victory over the French forces and those of their Vietnamese ally, the noncommunist Associated State of Vietnam. Always attuned to the importance of appearances, Thành requested that he be allowed to attend the congress secretly to avoid giving his enemies a pretext for carrying out "political attacks" against him and to avoid "inconveniences" for Stalin and the Soviet leadership with respect to the organization of a proper "reception."¹

As with his first visit to Stalin in early 1950, what Thành probably wanted to avoid most was having his visit to Moscow make him appear to be a Soviet agent rather than the internationally respected leader of a nation. If his anticommunist opponents in Vietnam, Paris, and Washington learned that he had arrived in Moscow with no official welcome, that he was known among Soviet leaders as "Comrade Din" rather than "Hồ Chí Minh," these enemies might publicize this as evidence that he were under Moscow's control. And again, lack of an official greeting in Moscow for "Hồ Chí Minh" might raise questions among

rank-and-file party members as well, who had already seen the Soviet Union wait more than four years before finally recognizing the DRV in January 1950.

Thành was able to meet one time with Stalin, during which the Soviet leader encouraged him to carry out land reform in a manner similar to that carried out by the CCP. As Gaiduk points out, this advice was in line with Stalin's general approach to Asian revolutions at the time.² It may have been a way of deflecting demands for increased Soviet aid. Scholarly rumor in Hanoi has long held that Stalin, during his meeting with Thành, had intimidated and challenged the DRV leader on the question of land reform: "This chair represents the landlords and this one the peasantry. Where do you sit?" According to this story, Thành had replied that he wanted to "sit in both chairs," that is, he wanted to be on the side of all Vietnamese in the countryside.

I have doubts about the veracity of this story. First, it receives no mention in Khrushchev's account of the meeting and has not been verified by any other Russian source. Second, it seems unlikely, considering Thành's concern about his reputation, that he would have told Vietnamese comrades of this demeaning treatment by Stalin. It is possible that the story was leaked by a Vietnamese translator present at the meeting—this assumes, however, that Thành, who had lived in the Soviet Union continuously from 1934 to 1938, had needed a translator to converse with Stalin. It is also possible that the story, like so many others about "Hồ Chí Minh," had been fabricated. The intention may have been to accentuate the idea of a plucky "Uncle Hồ" having stood up to Stalin courageously but ultimately having been bullied into submission on the issue of the land reform. Such is the toxic legacy of that radical campaign that a Hồ who bows to Stalin's will may have been seen as preferable to a Hồ who believes in the land reform.

My guess is that Thành, having come to Moscow to lobby Stalin for more weapons and aid, was disappointed to be told to carry out land reform. It does not appear from accounts of the French forces that the DRV military received any meaningful boost in weapons during the year following Thành's visit with Stalin. Upon leaving Moscow, Thành sent a brief note to Stalin:

Very much beloved and respected Comrade,

Today I am leaving for my country. I thank you very much for what you have done for me. I promise you to work diligently in the realization of the agrarian program and in waging our patriotic war. I hope I will be able to come back in two or three years so as to submit to you a report on the results of our work. I wish you very good health and very long life.

I embrace you heartily,

Din.³

The idea that Thành made the decision to carry out the “agrarian program” (i.e., land reform) during this trip to Beijing and Moscow is also supported by the account of the high-ranking revolutionary Hoàng Tùng (1920–2010), a member of the party Secretariat. He is most famous for having been the “managing editor” (the Communist term for “editor-in-chief”) of the party’s main organ, *The People*, from 1954 to 1982. In an account of his experiences with “Uncle Hồ” written for a talk delivered to cadres during his years of retirement, Tùng claims that Stalin and Mao had been pressuring Thành to carry out land reform since 1950:

After meeting with him, Stalin and Mao [in 1950] continued to pressure Uncle to act as they had, which meant to carry out the worker-peasant alliance led by the Party, establish a worker-peasant government, and then carry out land reform. Uncle did not yet want to carry out land reform. The three-stage theory that Trường Chinh put forward at the [February 1951] Second Congress reflected the idea of Uncle [có ý kiến của Bác]. According to the three-stage theory, land reform would be left for later while [the Party focused on] rent and debt reduction. Comrade Trường Chinh analysed this very well. In 1946, at a Regional Party branch meeting, I heard him say: “Under the revolutionary regime, small reforms have a revolutionary meaning; many small reforms added together make a big revolution.”⁴

According to Tùng, in the summer of 1952, Mao and Stalin saw that there had been “no mention of land reform” from the VWP leadership since the February 1951 Second Party Congress. Contradicting the evidence found by Gaiduk, Tùng claims (erroneously, it appears) that Stalin and Mao had “called Uncle Hồ to visit” because of his foot dragging on land reform. As we saw above, though, Thành seems to have taken the initiative to meet with Stalin. Similarly, the timing of Thành’s visit to Beijing—so close to the 19th CPSU Congress—and his rapid departure from Beijing for that Congress, give the impression that he traveled to the PRC largely on his own initiative for the purpose of joining their delegation traveling to Moscow.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that Mao and Stalin were not “determined to force [Thành] to carry out land reform.” According to Tùng, “only after seeing that he [Thành] could no longer refuse them did Uncle decide to carry out land reform.” After making the decision, Thành, using the pen name “Lê Đình” and perhaps writing in Moscow, penned an article titled “Terre et l’eau” [Land and Water], which he had published in the Cominform newspaper, *For a Lasting*

Peace, For a People's Democracy. The main point of the article was that peasants needed to be given land.⁵

Thành returned to Vietnam at some point in late November after having spent over a month in Moscow. He wrote an article titled "Appeal to the Vietnamese People on the Occasion of the Sixth Anniversary of National Resistance Struggle," which was published in the December 19, 1952 issue of the VWP's official organ, *The People*. Written under the name Hồ Chí Minh, this article seems to represent a turning point in the party's public discourse, signaling that the DRV would be going forward with a different policy in the countryside.⁶ That was the most obvious signal. However, upon closer examination, we can discern in the November 27 issue of *The People* a much subtler sign of the change in policy.

Adjusting the Historical Record

The November 27, 1952 issue of *The People* printed an advertisement for the recent publication of a new book by Trường Chinh titled *On the Vietnamese Revolution*. The book was a publication of his long report delivered at the Second Party Congress in February 1951: "Complete the Liberation of Our People, Develop People's Democracy, and Progress toward Socialism." One of the main themes of that speech had been the defense of Lenin's two-stage approach to revolutions carried out by colonial and semicolonial peoples—the very policy that was now being discarded. (Hoàng Tùng had referred to it as the "three-stage theory," but I interpret what Chinh described in his report as still following the classic Leninist framework of the two-stage approach.)

Before announcing the shift to land reform, Thành and the other party leaders apparently needed an internal domestic justification that could be publicized as having anticipated or formed the basis for the present course (rather than Stalin's command). Since no major party policy statements had advocated anything other than putting off a major attack on the landlord class until after the war against the French, internal justification for the change had to be manufactured. It was not possible to change the record completely since Trường Chinh had promoted the two-stage revolutionary approach in dozens of articles, speeches, and internal policy documents. Changing one crucial document would have to suffice. Below is the original version of Chinh's speech followed by the newer, edited version. One can see why Hoàng Tùng and perhaps others described it as a "three-stage approach." The adjustments are subtle, but significant:

[Original version read at the Second Congress, February 1951]

Therefore, the *basic tasks* of the Vietnamese revolution are what? They are:

- a. Drive out the imperialist aggressors, make Vietnam completely unified and independent (the anti-imperialist [task]);
- b. Abolish feudal and semi-feudal remnants, give land to the tiller, develop the people's democratic regime (the anti-feudal [task]);
- c. Create the basis for socialism.

The first of the tasks is the people's liberation task. The second two tasks are democratic ones.

In order to overthrow the imperialist aggressors, we must, at the same time, overthrow the reactionary feudal forces and, generally speaking, the various levels of imperialist puppets and lackeys. On the other hand, in order to abolish the reactionary feudal forces and the various puppet lackeys, we must overthrow the imperialist aggressors, because the imperialists try to preserve those forces as a means of hanging on to Vietnam. [. . .]⁷

[Edited November 1952 version]

Therefore, the *basic tasks* of the Vietnamese revolution are what? They are to liquidate imperialist aggressors and to overthrow the traitorous Vietnamese puppets; make Vietnam completely independent and unified; abolish feudal and semi-feudal remnants; give land to the tiller; develop the people's democratic regime; create the seeds of socialism in Vietnam.

Today, the imperialist aggressors and the reactionary feudalists collude tightly with each other.

In order to overthrow the imperialist aggressors, we must, at the same time, overthrow the reactionary feudal forces, because the reactionary feudalists are the lackeys of the imperialists. On the other hand, if we want to overthrow the reactionary feudal forces, we must overthrow the imperialist aggressors, because the imperialists depend on those [reactionary feudalist] forces as a means of stealing our country. [. . .]⁸

The key change in the second version is the replacement of the two sentences, "The first of the tasks is the people's liberation task. The second two tasks are democratic ones," with the sentence, "Today, the imperialist aggressors and the feudal reactionaries collude tightly with each other." It is likely that Chinh excised the two lines from the 1951 version because they seemed too rigidly in the mold of the two-stage formula now being abandoned.

Chinh's changes to the original report's section on landlords seem also to have been guided by the same imperative of making the current policy appear to have been anticipated more strongly by earlier statements:

[Original version of Trường Chinh's February 1951 report]

Today, Vietnamese landlords can be divided into three categories: the large landlords, the majority of whom are counterrevolutionary and hug the legs of the imperialists; the middle landlords, who are undecided and negative; the small landlords, who, because their economic situation is not much better than that of the rich peasants, support or participate in the anti-imperialist effort. The imperialists want to turn all Vietnamese landlords into their rearguard forces. One of our strengths is that we have made a significant number of Vietnamese landlords support our people's liberation, support the resistance war, or stand neutral but with sympathetic feelings toward the resistance war.⁹

With news from Thành that the party would be moving forward with land reform, Chinh again made adjustments:

[Edited 1952 version]

Today, during the resistance war, Vietnam's landlord class has split into clear groups: a number are reactionaries who hug the legs of the imperialists, with the majority of their ranks being *large landlords*. A number are undecided, neutral, or support the resistance war but are negative and weak-kneed, the majority being *middle and small landlords*.

With respect to our democratic reforms, the landlord class finds ways of distorting or resisting them.

A small number of *patriotic and progressive personalities* come from the landlord class, but stand among the ranks of the people in the resistance war and support the people's government.

Nevertheless, we should not forget that the landlord class is a feudal remnant. It exploits the peasant class, that is, the majority of the people, in a severe way. And it inhibits the economic, political, and cultural development of Vietnam. Speaking from a class perspective, *the landlord class is a target of the revolution*. As the revolution moves forward, democratic reforms will continue to be pushed forward, and the reaction of the landlord class will continue to grow stronger.

However, while the spearhead of the revolution is pointed at the imperialist aggressors as it is today, and excluding reactionary landlords, a number

of small and middle landlords can stand neutral or temporarily participate in in the people's liberation. But that does not change at all the basic character and responsibility of the Vietnamese revolution.¹⁰

Chinh had decided to remove the original version's final sentence, which stated that support from "a significant number of landlords" was one of the party's "strengths." He also added four paragraphs. These were typically vague in character but, for the most part, appear to have been written to make the earlier document gesture more strongly toward the current decision to embark upon land reform during the war rather than after it.

A New Inspection of the Countryside for the New Land Policy

While changing the official record of the party's land policy to make it anticipate the sudden move to land reform, the party leaders also, according to custom, attempted to frame the new policy as a practical response to the actual situation on the ground. At some point in early December, they organized an "inspection" of the countryside in a few areas in the Vietnamese North zone (the provinces of Thái Nguyên, Phú Thọ, and Bắc Giang).

In the Hanoi archive can be found a "Preliminary Report" and a "Final Report" on a ten-day "Meeting on the Inspection of the Countryside in the Vietnamese North Interzone," held from December 15 to 25, 1952. These suggest that this "inspection" ultimately had no significant impact on the party's formulation of land reform policy. Rather, the inspection is better understood as a ritual organized by the Politburo to provide a quasi-scientific cover for the arbitrary nature of the land reform policy.¹¹

The Preliminary Report from the conference contained three sections: (1) The Land Tenure System in the Countryside before the August Revolution; (2) Assessing the Interzone's Implementation of Land Policy from the August Revolution up to Today; (3) Issues Requiring Discussion so that Appropriate Requests to the Central Committee Can Be Made. The report's structure leads the reader to the conclusions that would form the party leadership's official justification for the land reform. Thus, the first part summarized the VWP's narrative of the damage to rural life caused by the feudal landlord class before the arrival of the French, and afterward, as colluders with the French in their colonial project:

The agricultural economy in days past used to be a self-sufficient one. Now, it has been flooded and captured by imperialist commodities. The peasants have been pauperized by high land rents and heavy taxes. Because of their

poverty, they have had to sell un-ripened rice and sell it cheaply. Moreover, they have had to buy expensive imperialist goods. As a result of this, they have become pauperized and their land concentrated in the hands of the landlords even more quickly.¹²

Expressed in this way, the inability of people in DRV-controlled areas to purchase Western goods was cast as a liberating favor bestowed upon the population by the DRV regime.

Having planted a notion of landlord treachery in the reader's mind, the report moved quickly to the issue of the party's rural policies since taking power in 1945. As we have seen, these policies had not been effective in stimulating an increase in productivity. How was that to be explained? Responsibility lay with the ruses of devious landlords and with the poor policy implementation of local cadres. An outside reader of the report on the countryside would have no idea about such things as the party's frequent rice requisitions, its agricultural tax, its demands that family members serve as "people's porters," and its recruitment of young men for the military. The conceptualization of the countryside put forward in the "inspection" made no mention of the DRV state as an extractive player in the rural economic scene.

Since taking power in 1945, the party had distributed large quantities of confiscated land. The Preliminary Report acknowledged that some land had been distributed "three or four times." How was such an odd situation to be explained? Why would peasants, whose great desire was to own land, return land that had been given to them? According to the report, this resulted from local cadres having carried out the redistribution of land in a "perfunctory manner," having "not understood that the ardent desire of the peasants is fairness and appropriateness."

The Preliminary Report also had to explain why the distribution of "public lands" had been so disappointing. Here there were vague hints about why peasants might have been unexcited about receiving public land, with brief mention of local cadres keeping public land "concentrated" and renting it out to local peasants, putting the rent collected on the land into "public works." In other words, the land was not actually given to the peasants but merely rented out to them. But the way this was described made it seem like a local initiative that had nothing to do with state policies.

In an obvious nod to the coming land reform, the Preliminary Report stated that public lands had not been distributed "fairly and appropriately" because local cadres had "not yet mobilized the masses to participate in the distribution."

Another reason for the poor results, the Preliminary Report argued, was that in some places women had not been given land or had only been given half the amount of land allotted to men. But this explained nothing about why those men who apparently did receive the lion's share of the land were so unproductive.

In addition to the problem of distributions of confiscated land and public land, the Preliminary Report had to explain why peasants had left so much farmland fallow:

There are many places where land that used to be farmed has now been left fallow. [One cause of this] is the evacuation of areas attacked by the French; another is French sweeps and the establishment of no-man's land areas. The quantity of this abandoned land is very large. . . . Recent calculations in Bắc Giang and Quảng Yên show that both have over 30,000 hectares of abandoned land. This is also the case in Vĩnh Phúc, and there over 20,000 hectares of abandoned land in Bắc Ninh province. . . .

Some of this fallow land was originally public land; some belonged to small landlords and rich peasants. Because of the high price of labor, they do not farm the land but hang on to it nonetheless. In some cases, fallow land is the result of enemy sweeps and the establishment of a no-man's land, in other cases it is the result of people having not yet zealously increased production. . . . Now, in many places, compatriots who had evacuated have returned to their villages, or there are places where people, as a result of the movement to increase production, have focused on farming land that had recently been cleared for farming. Because of all this, the Central Committee has released directives to [Party] executives instructing them to encourage [more] farming of fallow land. Places have implemented this policy but have not yet achieved concrete results.¹³

The second section of the Preliminary Report addressed the reasons why the party's land policies had not yet been "completely implemented." It began by affirming that "the Central Committee's policies were correct" and that "the peasant masses have a high spirit of struggle." The three key causes of the lack of "complete" policy implementation pointed neatly to the solutions offered in the coming land reform campaign: (1) cadre weaknesses, (2) the class composition of the party in the countryside, and (3) a lack of consciousness among the peasants.

With respect to the weaknesses of cadres, they had "not yet recognized clearly that the peasants are the main force of the revolution and the resistance war;" they had "not yet fully absorbed the policies;" they still had a "supra-class notion of unity," seeing different classes in the countryside as being similar

to each other; and cadres had “not known how to depend on the forces of the peasant masses when carrying out policies.” Second, as the report explained, in many localities, local political organizations were occupied disproportionately by members of the exploitative class. And third, with respect to the peasants themselves, their poor economic performance could be explained by their lack of education, which sometimes resulted in “incorrect thinking,” such as “relying too much on the government, on cadres, or on the goodness of landlords and rich peasants.”

The archival file on the “Meeting for the Inspection of the Countryside in the Vietnamese North Interzone” also contains a draft of the “Final Conclusions” of the conference. The agenda of this concluding report defined the parameters of discussion:

Issues that we need to assess:

1. What issues did we see in the countryside to report back to the Party?
2. In the implementation of the Party’s rural policies, we saw strength in what areas and weaknesses in what areas?
3. During this conference, we concretely helped the Central Committee in what ways with respect to its leadership of the countryside?
4. Through the work carried out at this Conference, what did cadres learn about ideology, political standpoint, and work style?

That is the content of the issues that we need to assess—that is the task of the conference.¹⁴

It appears that the party leaders set the meeting’s agenda to preclude any discussion of the merits of the policies themselves. In discussions of implementation, there was always the danger that people would explore the question of how easy or difficult a policy was to implement, a topic that would head people down the road of assessing the policy itself. This seems to explain why so much of the report focused on establishing the weaknesses of the people implementing the policies.

The Concluding Report’s first section, which dealt with the issues in the countryside to “report back to the Party,” began the landlord demonization that would drive the mass mobilization campaign. Therefore, cadres, after having “gone deep into the countryside,” had seen a number of landlord crimes: “allying with the imperialists,” “using nefarious schemes to occupy land,” and, of course, “exploiting the peasants” in a number of “cruel,” “sadistic,” “despotic,” “feudal,” and other ways.

We see clearly that the landlords and the church, through the use of superstition and the exploitation of land rents, are forcing peasants to remain in a state of ignorance and hunger.

We see that the peasants before the August Revolution suffered from impoverishment and ignorance because they were repressed and exploited by the imperialists and the landlords. At the same time, we recognize that, at the moment, peasants are still in a weak political position in the countryside because we have not yet mobilized the masses to solve the legitimate demands of the peasants.

What we have learned during this conference on the situation in different rural locations has given us, cadres and Vietnamese Workers' Party members, a responsibility. We must go deep into the countryside, and we must overthrow all reactionary forces there to resolve the urgent desires of the peasants.¹⁵

As for the “concrete” ways that the conference had contributed to helping the party, the Concluding Report attempted to suggest that the VWP leaders would base their policy on the picture of the countryside that had been “reflected back” to them through the inspection. Therefore, the final conclusions, probably as a result of the party leadership’s anxiety about the arbitrary nature of the decision to carry out land reform, which came primarily from Stalin and Mao, needed to accentuate the importance of the inspection as the basis for the policy. “[The inspection] has enabled the party to see more clearly the importance of inspecting the countryside. Only by inspecting closely every aspect of the rural situation can concrete policies be formed.”

Toward the middle of the Concluding Report was a brief section on issues that have “not yet been resolved.” This included “concrete documents” and “accurate figures” on the “whole situation” of different localities in the countryside. The first example put forward seems pregnant with meaning for the overall purpose of the campaign: “district A or province B or subdistrict C has how many landlords; they have occupied how much land; how many poor peasants are there; and how much land do they have?”

The second-to-last section of the Concluding Report was titled “The Reasons for the Conference’s Success.” The first three of the five reasons were the consistent efforts of the participants, the alleged fact that reports of the situation “stemmed from the grassroots level of subdistricts, districts, and provinces,” and the inspection’s focus on provinces (Phú Thọ, Bắc Giang, and Thái Nguyên) where land was “concentrated.” As for the last two of the five reasons for success:

The conference combined the task of inspection with the task of studying the experience of actual struggle against the landlord at the plantation in Đồng Bám [subdistrict] in order to help representatives discover more problems in localities and, at the same time, to help representatives study more the experience of struggle.

The conference's success was thanks to the helpful attention of the Central Committee. [It also succeeded] because it was attended by a [Chinese] Advisor, who was present throughout the entirety of the Conference, who participated in the assembly hall, in small groups, and in everyday consultations, leading the Conference to achieve many good results.¹⁶

It appears, therefore, that at least one CCP advisor had helped to shape what DRV cadres carrying out the inspection were supposed to find in the countryside.

It is worth mentioning as well that the two documents summarizing the results of the rural inspection contained very little if any technical discussion of the science of agriculture. There was no discussion of different crops, of new ideas for irrigation, of regions that seemed to have unusually strong productivity, of rainfall levels, salinity, erosion, etc. The inspection seems to have been organized to give the impression that virtually all problems in the countryside could be solved through purging, land redistribution, and a more vigorous attempt to implement the party's same policies for stimulating production.

Announcing the Land Reform Policy

Nguyễn Tất Thành's previously mentioned article, "Chairman Hồ's Appeal on the Occasion of the Resistance War's Sixth Anniversary," published in the December 19 issue of *The People*, was the first article in that organ to mention directly the party's intention to adopt a new approach to the countryside in the coming year. After providing an inspiring assessment of the war against the French, he turned to the issue of domestic policy:

A weakness of ours is the fact that we have not yet implemented correctly the land policy that the Government has promulgated for a long time now. Nearly 90 percent of our countrymen are peasants. Within the ranks of our National Defense forces, local militias, and people's guerrillas, over 90 percent are peasants. Whether it be paying taxes or serving as people's porters, the majority are peasants. Our peasant countrymen contribute the most to the resistance and sacrifice the most for the Fatherland. Yet for all that, the peasants are still the poorest and most miserable because they lack

land. The reduction of land rent and loan interest rates is a legitimate right of the peasants, and it has not yet been implemented thoroughly. That is an unfair situation. Therefore, this upcoming year, the Government, the Party, and the Front will resolutely mobilize the peasantry to implement completely the policy of rent and interest reduction in order to guard the legitimate rights of the peasants.¹⁷

As for how the campaign would be implemented, Thành mentioned the idea that the peasants would have a role to play. “With respect to the peasants, they must act on their own volition, be conscious, organize tightly, and support enthusiastically the policy.” In retrospect, Thành’s description, though vague, appears to foreshadow the theatrical role that would be required of the peasants in the coming campaign. They would have to provide visible signs that they had “come to consciousness.” The “Chairman Hồ Appeal” also foreshadowed the party leadership’s special attempt to give a veneer of legality to the mass mobilization, almost always stressing the program as having derived from the government and mass organizations rather than from the party (or, more accurately, from the Politburo).

After Thành’s appeal, *The People* began to publish a series of articles written by members of the Politburo. All articles, in some way or another, built upon the general themes advanced in Thành’s original appeal and prepared the way for the upcoming mass mobilization campaign. Thus, in the January 15, 1953 issue of the newspaper *The People*, the party leaders printed excerpts from a speech apparently delivered by Prime Minister Phạm Văn Đồng to the Council of Ministers at the end of the year. With their constant encouragement of members of the party rank and file to engage in self-criticism, the party leaders could not completely forgo this ritual themselves. Yet, again, apparently to avoid the crisis of faith that an admission of error risked triggering, their self-criticisms were carefully constructed to conform to the overall narrative of top-party correctness and lower-party error:

As for the upper level [of the Party], first and foremost the offices of the central committee, the work of *leading* and *directing* has suffered from the following weaknesses: [they] have not outlined very clearly the responsibilities and tasks of cadres along with the methods of implementing those tasks. For example: with the plan for production and thrift, [the central committee offices] have not explained clearly how the plan should be seen, have not shown clearly the extent to which [the plan] must be carried out, how it must be carried out, and have not determined concretely the demand

and goal of the plan. As a result of this, people at the local level have badly misunderstood [the Party's policies], have been totally confused, wasting a great deal of time and effort and, in the final analysis, not achieving any concrete results. There are actually many places where, because of concern over production and economization, [local cadres] have paid little or no attention to the work of collecting agricultural taxes.¹⁸

With respect to the party's apparatus at the local level, *Đông* also expressed disappointment with its performance, describing it as suffering from "pretty serious" weaknesses. The organization was "impure," meaning, as the prime minister explained:

A significant number of those local cadres belong to the petit-bourgeois, rich peasant, and landlord class, who, for a long time now, have not received education or reform. Because of this, their thinking is still heavily infused with a self-serving perspective, and they do not understand and implement policies correctly. They even intentionally carry out the policies incorrectly. With respect to their style of working, they are not only bureaucratic and autocratic but despotic and militaristic as well.¹⁹

According to *Đông*, these "subjective weaknesses" of the higher echelon of the party's "leadership and guidance" had "hindered" the completion of the party's tasks for the year 1952.

In addition to complaining of this problem, the prime minister stressed in his speech that another factor had "limited" the positive results of the regime's policies—results that "should have been achieved." Echoing the basic idea that we saw in the "Final Conclusions" of the recent inspection of the countryside, *Đông* stated that the party had "not yet used the enormous force of the masses, especially the peasant masses." As the DRV prime minister explained, "We have not yet relied upon that force to strictly implement our policy, to complete our task."²⁰ Thus one of the key tasks for 1953 would be the "mobilization of the peasant masses," to inspire them to "stand up" and demand their "legitimate rights." According to *Đông*'s narrative, this would unleash the productive forces of the poor-peasant majority.

The prime minister's speech, reprinted in *The People*, had all the elements of the mass mobilization narrative that would animate the campaign over the next three and a half years. The unsatisfactory results of the party's agricultural programs and the general retreat of the peasants from agriculture in the face of the party's rice requisitions, and so on, were to be framed in the language

of class struggle. The party's correct policies had achieved poor results due to local cadres—who came from or who had strong relations with the exploitative classes—dragging their feet and refusing to implement policies. For this reason, part of what was needed was a “reorganization” (*chỉnh đốn tổ chức*) of the local party apparatus. As tens of thousands of local cadres would learn over the next three years, the term “reorganization” meant “purge.”

As we examined above, Trường Chinh had published a reworked version of the speech he had given at the 1951 Second Party Congress. *The People* had advertised the release of that new book in the November 27, 1952 issue, but had provided no commentary on its content. Apparently, by January 22, 1953, Chinh felt that enough time had passed for the rewritten speech to be “discovered” by a *The People* staff writer named Minh Nghĩa. His article would show that Chinh had actually anticipated the early move to land reform back in February 1951. The first paragraph of Nghĩa's article, which was titled “A Sharp Weapon: Reading Comrade Trường Chinh's Book *On the Vietnamese Revolution*,” reveals the book's function vis-à-vis the appearance of the land reform policy:

During the Congress for the founding of the Vietnamese Workers Party (2–1951), and following Chairman Hồ's “Political Report,” Comrade Trường Chinh read a report titled “On the Vietnamese Revolution.” This report was discussed with great intensity because, as was also the case with Chairman Hồ's “Political Report,” it discussed an issue closely related to the destiny of our party today and tomorrow. And [the report] is the foundation for the Party's new policy.²¹

The part of Chinh's published (i.e., the edited) version of the original speech that was quoted at length by Nghĩa was the part that had been quietly rewritten by the general secretary sometime in November. Nghĩa's depiction of Chinh's rewritten version made it seem even more pointed toward the land reform than the general secretary's rewrite. This was done by adjusting quoted passages from Chinh's rewritten version of the 1951 speech, removing lines that had a hint of ambiguity to them or that still bore traces of the original two-stage policy.

Apparently to further the legitimacy of this argument about Chinh's speech as the “foundation” for the recent shift to land reform, Minh Nghĩa spent much of the second half of his article criticizing “many cadres” for “not yet recognizing the closely intertwined relationship between the anti-imperialist and antifeudal tasks,” for “not yet looking deeply into the character of the landlord class,” for “not yet recognizing the crucial role of the peasant class,” and for “not

recognizing clearly that the landlord class is a target of the revolution while the peasant class is its main force.” Two of these three criticisms about the lateness of party members to “recognize clearly” key principles related to the land reform were backed up with the sentences that Trường Chinh had added to the February 1951 speech in his November 1952 rewrite.

*The 4th Plenum of the Party's Central Executive
Committee: January 25–30, 1953*

The first official party meeting held after Thành's return from Moscow and Beijing with the basic plan for the land reform was the 4th Plenum of the Party Executive Committee. The decision to move forward with land reform having already been made, the late January plenum was the first opportunity for DRV leaders to formalize and present to members of the Central Committee some of their thinking about basic aspects of the campaign. As was customary, Thành delivered the opening report, setting forth in a condensed form the major ideas to be discussed in greater detail by his lieutenants in the Politburo (Trường Chinh, Phạm Văn Đồng, Võ Nguyên Giáp, Hoàng Quốc Việt, etc.).

The desire of VWP leaders to stay in the good graces of Stalin and Mao, the DRV's sources of material and spiritual support during the war, is apparent in the opening lines of both Thành's and Trường Chinh's reports. The former began as follows: “In opening this Meeting, speaking on behalf of the entire Central Committee, I begin by sending the warmest greetings to comrade Stalin and comrade Mao Zedong.” Chinh was no less effusive in the opening of his report:

Comrades,

This meeting of the Central Committee is taking place after the publication of comrade Stalin's new work, *Economic Issues of Socialism in the Soviet Union* and after the 19th Congress of the CPSU decided its new guidelines and tasks for pushing forward the consolidation of peace and the Soviet Union's gradual move from socialism to communism.

This meeting of the Central Committee is [also] taking place after the People's Republic of China's victorious completion of land reform, its start of a large-scale five-year plan for national construction, and the preparations for general election for a National Assembly as well as for the drafting of a Constitution.²²

Frequently the workhorse in these matters, Chinh devoted the entirety of his report's first section (eight pages), titled “Our Path Has Been Further

Illuminated,” to a description of the ways in which Stalin’s new book, along with the report he delivered at the CPSU 19th Congress, served as the “extremely bright guiding light that illuminates our revolutionary path.” According to Chinh, Stalin’s new book “further developed Marxism-Leninism” and included “many extremely important theoretical and practical matters.” Furthermore, “Comrade Stalin showed clearly the enormous difference between socialist and capitalist regimes.”

On the international front, *Economic Issues of Socialism in the Soviet Union* “illuminate for us the world situation today, enabling us to see clearly the decay of the capitalist system and the unceasing development of socialism.” With respect to the prospects of the Soviet-led “peace movement,” Chinh quoted Stalin’s book: “If we want to eliminate the unavoidability of war, we need to abolish imperialism.” He had seized upon a line that could be interpreted as supporting the notion that, in fighting the French, the DRV were participating in Stalin’s peace movement.

According to Chinh, Stalin’s assessment of the peace movement was “truly clear and profound” (*thật là rõ ràng, sâu sắc*). And, in conclusion, “as with the people of other countries, our people, under the leadership of Chairman Hồ, are progressing along the road to peace, democracy, and socialism that comrade Stalin has illuminated.”²³

Thành’s Opening Report at the 4th Plenum

Thành’s opening report devoted relatively more time to praising the results achieved by Mao and the PRC, particularly those related to the land reform:

The *distribution of land* to peasants in China has been a tremendous success. At the end of 1952, more than 500 million peasants enjoyed 700 million hectares of land. Previously, every year peasants had to give landlords 30 million tons of rice in land tax, but now that amount belongs to the peasants. Because [the Chinese peasants] have escaped from the oppressive yoke of the landlords, they have *increased production* with great enthusiasm. The clear result is that compared with 1949, food production in 1950 was up 20%, and in 1952 it was up 40%. [. . .] The peasants have helped the Government liquidate more than two million bandits [*thổ phi*]. They have dug canals and built dikes, [transporting] 1,700 million cubic meters of soil. This has enabled them to save 6,600,000 hectares of land from flooding and drought. No longer exploited by landlords, the peasants consume in abundance. Compared with 1949, [Chinese] peasants in 1952

saw their buying power increase by 25%. As a result of this, *technology and commerce* have developed quickly. *Culture* has also developed rapidly.²⁴

Most of these ideas about land reform in China were then echoed by Thành in his description of what a similar reform would bring to Vietnam. Discussion of that policy comprised the second of his report's two major sections, "*Mobilize the masses this year to completely reduce rents and interest so as to progress toward land reform.*" Laying out the justification for land reform that would be repeated hundreds of times in various party publications over the next three years, Thành linked difficulties faced by the party in "bolstering its forces among the people and its forces for the resistance war" to the lack of proper implementation of the government's order to reduce land rents, which had been promulgated shortly after the 1945 August Revolution. Seven years later in the beginning of 1953, "some places had not reduced land rents the right amount and other places had not yet reduced them [at all]." As a result, in 1953 the party had to "resolutely and thoroughly implement rent reduction."

How would this be done?

To do so, we need to make an effort to *mobilize the peasant masses*, to make the *masses awaken and voluntarily* step forward to struggle for an absolute reduction of rents and interests, and to seize political predominance in the countryside. The Party and the Government must lead, organize, help, and inspect [that process].

After rents and interest have been reduced, after the peasants have been mobilized, after our political organization has been stabilized, after our forces have been adequately strengthened, after laboring peasants have achieved political predominance, and after a majority of peasants demand it—we will carry out land reform.²⁵

Turning his attention to the land reform itself, Thành, in a spirit similar to that of Trường Chinh with his editing of the 1951 speech, tried to redefine an older two-stage slogan so that it seemed to cohere with the new move to land reform. He explained in his speech that "the foundation of the national issue is the peasant issue because the vast majority of the people are peasants." The peasants were not only the "foundation of the national issue," Thành argued, but they were the "foundation of the democratic revolution;" they were the "largest revolutionary force against feudalism and imperialism."

If the peasants were the "foundation of the democratic revolution," why had the party waited seven years to carry out land reform? Thành explained:

The past few years, because of special circumstances, we only carried out rent and interest reduction. And to do so was correct.

But today, the resistance war has carried on for seven years now; our peasant countrymen have sacrificed for the Fatherland and for the resistance war a great deal. And they remain prepared to sacrifice and contribute more still. But they remain the poorest and most miserable class of people because they either have too little land or no land at all. That is something extremely inappropriate.

If we want the resistance war to be brought to complete victory and people's democracy to be truly implemented, then we must actually *raise the economic and political interests of the peasants; we must distribute land to the peasants.*

To carry out land reform, Thành argued, would “solve a number of problems” for the party. First, on the military front, it was expected to make the peasants “even more enthusiastic about *participating in the army*” and help to “break apart the puppet army,” that is, the army of the French-backed State of Vietnam. On the economic front, land reform in Vietnam, as Thành had described for China, would help the peasants to have “enough food to eat and clothes to wear, [generate] a great increase in production, and [generate] agricultural development.” This would result in the peasants having money to buy goods, which would help the growth of handicrafts, commerce, and technology, leading ultimately to the growth of industry. Moreover, carrying out land reform, Thành explained, would make the peasants “enthusiastic about paying the agricultural tax,” which in turn would “bring an abundance” to the state's finances.²⁶

Why were the state's finances in such a bad state of affairs at the moment? The answer to this question related to the planned purge of the party apparatus, especially at the local level. It appears that the party leaders had been seriously considering carrying out this purge before the end of the war as something separate from the land reform. But now, it was going to be coupled with the campaign. Thành explained:

The agricultural tax is still collected slowly and not to the right level. The Government's policy is very correct, and our countrymen are very enthusiastic to contribute. Why, then, is the tax collected slowly and not to the correct level? The reason is that many cadres, especially at the lower level, have impure class backgrounds. Or, they do not grasp the Party and Government's policies, do not correctly follow the mass line, and do

not set a good example, with the result being that they do not complete their duties.²⁷

Thành's and the Politburo's shift to land reform involved many minor changes to and slight misrepresentations of the past record. The content of these adjustments is not as important as what they reflect about the psychology of the VWP leaders. They were nervous about appearances and took bizarre and tedious measures to assuage that anxiety. Part of their motivation surely stemmed from concern that rank-and-file party members might suspect a connection between the decision to carry out land reform and Thành's secret visit to Beijing and Moscow. This could raise questions about the nature of the relationship between the DRV and its two main allies.

If Thành had decided himself, without pressure from Stalin and Mao, to depart from the original plans and make the sudden move to land reform, would he and the Politburo still have felt the need to show continuity with earlier policy statements? I believe so. What Thành, Trường Chinh, and the other DRV leaders expected was a quasi-religious faith in their leadership and in the Marxist-Leninist ideology on which it was based. That ideology was supposed to give them the ability to see the future, meaning that they should not have to contradict earlier assessments and predictions.

The Basic Structure of the Mass Mobilization

Over the next three years (1953–1956), Nguyễn Tất Thành, Trường Chinh, Phạm Văn Đồng, and other party leaders would produce thousands of pages of explanations, clarifications, and exhortations all dealing with aspects of the land reform campaign (officially called the “mass mobilization through rent reduction and land reform”). In addition to these writings, an enormous amount of material on the campaign was produced by DRV intellectuals in the form of poems, short stories, reportage-style accounts, songs, and even novels. At a third level, the party leaders organized simple mass mobilization newspapers that were to be produced mostly, as it seems, by lower-level DRV journalists embedded within land reform “brigades” (groups of several hundred rent-reduction or land-reform cadres working in one region under the control of one leader).

Most of the basic structure of the campaign, though, was explained over the course of 1953. The peculiarities of that structure, which I will examine presently, stemmed primarily from the inescapable logic of land reform as a tool of mass mobilization. The meaningful redistribution of land and belongings required that every community have some members targeted as landlords. Added to this basic material logic were two psychological ones. The first was the party leadership’s intention to use the landlord class as a scapegoat for six years of unsuccessful economic policies and other unpleasant aspects of rural life in the DRV’s “liberated zones.” For this narrative to hold weight, landlords and traitors needed to be active in every community.

The second factor, which may have been the greater of the two, was the need to please Mao Zedong, the person who controlled the dispensation of the DRV’s Soviet aid. The party leaders had no adequate means of generating money for the purchase of weapons. Increasingly headed down the road to famine, their window of opportunity in the war was starting to close. They needed to inflict on the French a major military defeat that would compel their withdrawal. A minimum requirement of such a victory was the continued supply (and, hopefully,

the increase) of Soviet weapons, which were distributed to the DRV at Chinese discretion. Since land reform was Mao's policy, Thành and other DRV leaders must have felt pressure to implement that policy in a way that showed Vietnamese Communists to be Mao's worthy pupils.

Looking at the structure of the land reform as it was described in 1953, we can see that just about every oddity of the campaign stemmed in one way or another from the challenge of ensuring sufficient targets for struggle. A crucial mechanism for meeting that challenge was the landlord quota expressed as a percentage of the total population. Generally, the DRV leaders followed Chinese precedent and set that ratio at five percent, with the figure 5.68 percent becoming standard toward the later waves of the campaign.¹ Thành and the Politburo leaders knew full well that nowhere near five percent of the countryside could reasonably be considered "landlords."

An official census carried out by the DRV's Bureau of Statistics (*Nha Thống kê*) in August of 1951 shows the arbitrary and exaggerated nature of the party's five-percent-landlord claim. In the DRV, the standard operating procedure for carrying out a new government policy was to choose a few "typical" (*điển hình*) areas where the policy could be tested. This test area was then supposed to serve as a model for other areas to follow. In the minds of the DRV leaders, the district of Diên Châu in the Central Vietnamese province of Nghệ An was a typical one from which general conclusions could be drawn.²

The census for the agricultural tax contained forty-six different categories, one of which was social class. The regime divided social class into the five categories developed by the Soviets in their assessment of the countryside: (1) Landless peasant (*cố nông*), (2) Poor peasant (*bần nông*), (3) Middle peasant (*trung nông*), (4) Rich peasant (*phú nông*), and (5) Landlord (*địa chủ*). According to the Bureau of Statistics, Diên Châu's class composition broke down into the following numbers:

Landless Peasants: 3,020

Poor Peasants: 19,438

Middle Peasants: 7,081

Rich Peasants: 513

Landlords: 95

Out of a total adult population of 30,147, only ninety-five people were identified as landlords by cadres from the Bureau of Statistics. This meant roughly one landlord for every 300 people—a landlord ratio of about 0.3 percent of the district's total population. The party leaders' landlord ratio of five percent was

roughly fifteen times higher than the ratio found in the supposedly “typical” district of Diên Châu less than two years earlier.

Thus, for Thành and other DRV leaders, the challenge of finding sufficient landlord targets is apparent. To make the campaign work, the party leaders would need to find ways of pressuring mass mobilization cadres into identifying tens of thousands of regular peasants as “cruel and despotic landlords.”

The Three Phases of the Mass Mobilization

In line with the CCP model, the DRV’s land reform was initially conceived as having three phases. The first was called “mass mobilization for rent reduction” (*phát động quần chúng giảm tô*), the second was the “mass mobilization for land reform” (*phát động quần chúng cải cách ruộng đất*), and the third was “reinspection” (*phúc tra*). The more moderate “rent reduction” phase, which was to be the focus of 1953, was supposed to prepare the way for the much more aggressive “land reform” phase. During the rent reduction phase, cadres would limit their attack to “ringleaders” (*đầu sỏ*) of the landlord class. During the succeeding “land reform” phase, cadres would expand the attack to the entire landlord class and “thoroughly implement” the slogan “land to the tiller.”

Contrary to what had been suggested in the February 1951 version of the Party Platform, mass mobilization would be carried out not in the part of the country where agricultural land ownership was most concentrated—the South—but in the northern half of the country. And it would be implemented only in those “free” areas that were under “firm” DRV control.³ The campaign was to be developed in the manner of a “spreading oil stain.” As Trường Chinh explained, mass mobilization brigades under the direct control of the Central Committee would work together with zone and province-level party leaders to carry out mass mobilization in a few “representative” or “typical” subdistricts. Lessons from that initial experience would then serve as the basis for the prompt expansion of the campaign (again, in the “spreading oil stain” manner) to surrounding subdistricts.

Attendees of the 4th Plenum learned that there were four basic “principles” to the mass mobilization campaign:

1. The mass mobilization is to be based on the urgent near-term desires of the majority of the masses in a locality, with cadres putting forward slogans that are appropriate [to those desires].
2. Cadres need to patiently educate the masses, making the majority of them awaken and struggle on their own volition. Cadres must absolutely not take

an authoritarian approach, acting in place of the masses, and cadres should not act as though doing favors for the masses.

3. Cadres need to find loyal and zealous elements of the masses to act as backbones [*cốt cán*] to help the Party lead the movement.
4. Both peasant men and women will be mobilized, and cadres should rigorously reorganize the local Peasant National Salvation Association so that it can serve as the core of the movement.⁴

With respect to the “general strategy” of the mass mobilization in its initial rent-reduction phase, Chinh explained that cadres would need to “rely on landless and poor peasants, unify closely with the middle peasants, neutralize rich peasants, struggle against landlords, and overthrow reactionary Vietnamese traitors.” As for the specific strategy to be used in the struggle with the landlords, Chinh described it as “hit and pull them, while pulling them hit them, while hitting them pull them, hit them first, pull them after.”⁵

Preparatory Tasks for the Mass Mobilization

For the mass mobilization to attain “good results” in 1953, Trường Chinh stressed four preparatory tasks: (1) inspection, (2) policy preparation, (3) ideological preparation, and (4) organizational preparation. The first task, inspection, involved “investigating the implementation of the Party and Government’s land policies along with the strength of the enemy, French puppets, feudalists, and reactionaries.” In other words, though the mass mobilization for rent reduction was to be carried out in areas that were supposedly under firm DRV control, in some cases having been so for years, cadres were to assume that the “enemy” existed in every community. They were also to inspect each subdistrict’s five principal political organizations: the local party cell, the Resistance Committee, the People’s Committee, the Peasant National Salvation Association, and the United Vietnam Association. Chinh instructed that mass mobilization cadres should “determine clearly the class backgrounds of those organizations as well as the thinking and conduct of subdistrict-level cadres.”⁶

The second item, policy preparation, involved having the government promulgate a “land law” related to the “main slogan” of 1953: “completely reduce rents and implement loan interest rate reduction.” Chinh explained that, in addition to and separate from the government’s land reform law would be an internal directive released by the Central Committee “stating clearly the peasants’ political program of struggle as well as the disciplinary regulations for cadres in their implementation of the land policy.” It appears that “cadres” here refers to

local cadres rather than to the outside cadres who would be sent into communities to carry out mass mobilization.

The third item, thought preparation (*chuẩn bị tư tưởng*), referred to the party's efforts to "propagandize, explain, and publicize the land policy" with the goal being to "win over the thinking of cadres, party members, and regular people." Perhaps with the thousands of future land reform cadres in mind, upon whom the DRV leaders would need to rely for carrying out the mass mobilization, Chinh stressed the need to overcome ways of thinking that were likely to hinder the movement: "fear of harming [national] unity, fear of landlord resistance, contempt for the [power] of the landlord class, or pessimism in assessing the basic situation resulting in [a cadre's] not daring to mobilize the masses, etc." It appears that the Politburo, from the campaign's beginning, was realistic about the enormous challenge posed by the task of compelling thousands of cadres to find tens of thousands of landlords who simply did not exist.

Finally, the fourth item was organizational preparation. This meant "concentrating cadres, teaching them the policy, and organizing them into individually commanded brigades (*đoàn*) so that they could help localities mobilize the masses and help the Central Committee lead the mass movement."⁷

The Method for Inspiring Attacks on Landlords

By early 1953, the Politburo had already begun to use "speak bitterness" (*tổ khổ*) sessions as a means of aiding the consolidation of DRV power in areas that had recently been won from the French and the State of Vietnam. In those circumstances, cadres were to go into recently "liberated" villages and organize meetings where peasants would be prompted to speak publicly about the terrible condition of life in the village while under enemy control. Organizing "speak bitterness" sessions would be a fundamental part of a land reform cadre's work in a village. In these sessions, cadres had to help peasants "describe the crimes of landlords" so as to "topple the prestige of the landlords and raise the prestige of the peasants." Through participation in "speak bitterness" sessions, the peasant masses "would be educated to develop their class consciousness."

As for the particulars of how the struggle during these "speak bitterness" sessions would be carried out, Trường Chinh explained:

The struggle must be differentiated according to whether the target is big or small and the character of each type. [Land reform cadres and peasants] need to combine the following forms of struggle: struggle through argument (base oneself on reality and crush the mealy-mouthed arguments of

the landlords); struggle through force (use the power of the masses to force the landlord into submission), struggle through law (use the law of the state to deal with cruel and stubborn landlords).

Despite the menacing tone of his description, Chinh insisted that “during the struggle, [cadres and peasants?] absolutely may not use torture, may not strike out rashly, and may not kill indiscriminately.”⁸

Two Speeches by Nguyễn Tất Thành

Speech 1: All-Nation Meeting of Peasant and People's Mobilization (February 5, 1953)

The People's Mobilization Organization (Dân vận) had been put together and expanded by the party leadership in the earliest days of the 1945 August Revolution. It appears that the “peasant mobilization” branches of that overall organization would end up being transformed during the mass mobilization campaign into the party's Land Reform Committees (Ủy ban cải cách ruộng đất). On February 5, 1953, members of these committees listened to Thành speak about the coming campaign:

Our country must head toward true democracy. True democracy is fighting against the feudal landlords and the imperialists.

After 80 years of slavery, our people have risen up and overthrown the imperialists to win independence. The feudal landlords are scheming to sell out our country. Who is in the puppet Government? Bảo Đại and other ringleaders are all great feudal landlords. The imperialists exploit the feudal landlords to steal our country. The feudal landlords cling to the imperialists in order to oppress and exploit our people. Therefore, if we want to be victorious in the resistance war, we need to overthrow not only the imperialists but also the feudal landlords.⁹

Thành then turned his attention to the precedent set by other countries in the Communist bloc:

The new democracies like China and North Korea along with the European [new] democracies all distribute land to the peasants. The basic content of the democratic revolution is liberating peasants and giving them land. The content of the national revolution is also the liberation of peasants. True democracy exists only when the peasants truly hold political power in the countryside, when the peasants have been liberated.

The timing of the shift to land reform, being a departure from earlier theoretical statements and policies, continued to be a source of anxiety for Thành. Again, the current demonization of landlords inevitably raised questions about yesterday's alliance with them. Had the earlier policy between incorrect? As Thành again explained, because of the "special circumstances" in which the August Revolution had occurred, the party leaders had opted only to carry out rent and debt reduction. To do so was correct; the problem was that these policies had not been "implemented thoroughly."

The Party and Government's policies are correct, so why have they not been implemented thoroughly?

One reason is that cadres have not understood the policies and have lacked a firm political standpoint. They have wanted to win the hearts of both the peasants and the landlords, and sometimes of the landlords more. Another reason is that cadres have been out for themselves. Although they are Party members, their feudal landlord tails have stuck out. They have not yet scrubbed themselves clean of their feudal landlord thinking. They get the peasants to lead the charge but do not join the charge themselves. [Local cadres] have even been corrupt and wasteful. Cadres from the zone down through the province, district, and commune levels have all, more or less, committed the above mistakes. Basically, the minds of cadres are still heavily infused with landlord thinking.

All of you need to scrub yourselves clean of feudal landlord thinking.¹⁰

Lest his audience at the "people's mobilization" meeting lose heart—most of them probably came from elite families—Thành offered some words of encouragement. There were "a few" landlords who had become revolutionaries. Despite their landlord backgrounds, these revolutionaries "stood on the side of the proletariat and were members of the working class." Harkening back to his days as a Comintern agent in Republican China during the 1920s, Thành instructed his audience to think of the Chinese revolutionary Peng Pai:

Probably all of you have heard of comrade Peng Pai in China. He came from a great feudal landlord family, but he organized and led the peasants to struggle with great ferocity against the feudal landlords.

It is true that family background matters. However, if a person comes from a landlord family but stands firmly on the side of the peasants, that person is no longer a landlord. In China they refer to landlords who welcome land reform as "civilized notables." Therefore, if you resolutely scrub

yourselves clean of your landlord thinking, even if you come from a landlord family you can still participate in the revolution.¹¹

Then Thành turned his attention to tasks associated with serving as a land reform cadre, a job that most of his audience had been selected to perform. The fact that the party's rent-reduction policy still had not been carried out "thoroughly" four years after the promulgation of the 1949 Rent Reduction Decree showed that the problem was "not simple." Indeed, according to Thành, the problem was one of "class warfare, with the peasant class struggling against the landlord class." The mass mobilization was like a "military campaign," Thành explained, but it was larger than the Hòa Bình province or Northwest campaigns because it would be "implemented throughout the entire country." And like all other military campaigns, he added, the mass mobilization needed to be well organized and carefully led with clear policies. "As is the case when we attack the enemy, we need to know what we can do, what we cannot yet do, how to do it, what the first step is, the second, and third."

What was the key to following the appropriate plan and leading the mass mobilization correctly? According to Thành, a mass mobilization cadre's "political standpoint had to be solid and his thinking clear." This would contribute to a cadre's having "unity of thinking and action, unity of theory and practice." Another key to success was the "absolute avoidance of subjective thinking." Thành's explanation of what "subjective thinking" meant was hardly clear, but seemed to have something to do with not being fooled by appearances:

[The cadre who is guilty of subjective thinking] imagines that, with a method and a policy, everything can be accomplished smoothly. He is so interested in grasping everything, in doing everything, and doing it quickly, that he fails to grasp the main point. Experience has shown that the landlord class has a great many schemes, is extremely Machiavellian [*xảo quyệt*], and extremely cruel. . . . The landlord class has a thousand ruses, from buying off cadres, to inviting cadres to eat, to offering cadres their daughters. [The landlords] even sabotage the harvest, sow disorder, and assassinate both cadres and peasants. The landlords stop at no evil scheme, and dealing with them is no easy task. They have thousands of years of experience in their reign and have many wicked tricks. If we underestimate the enemy, we will fail.¹²

Thus, according to Thành, a cadre who entered a village that had been under DRV control for years, as was especially the case in the early part of the mass

mobilization campaign, and found himself treated hospitably and respectfully by a local “landlord,” should see that behavior as a “wicked trick,” a “Machiavelian” scheme to sabotage the mass mobilization. To take that polite behavior at face value, it appears, was to be “subjective.” To impose on that community the party’s narrative of landlord treachery, regardless of how things appeared, was to be “objective.”

Before ending his speech to these peasant mobilization cadres, Thành gave them one last instruction:

There is one more thing that you need to understand: The Party leads the peasants; the peasants do not lead the Party. All of you need to recognize clearly that you are the working class leading the peasants. The cadre who says “I am standing in for the peasants” is speaking incorrectly. As a party member, you need to serve the peasants and lead them in their resistance struggle to build the country, but you do not stand in the position of the peasant.¹³

This appears to be a vague warning to prospective land reform cadres that peasants, though supposedly the beneficiaries of the reform, might not all appreciate the program brought into their communities by cadres.

*Speech 2: Opening Ceremony of Thought-Reform
Class for Central Committee Offices*

A second Thành speech targeted “intellectuals” who had been recruited to work as aides in Central Committee offices and who were just beginning their “thought reform” course. As we saw earlier, the overall goal of thought reform was to cleanse party members of “petit-bourgeois thinking,” or—as was being stressed more and more frequently, “landlord thinking.” The basic method involved dividing students into small groups in which individuals would have to carry out criticism and self-criticism. The leaders of the thought reform would put forward a pool of possible sins and a cadre would need to choose the ones that seemed most appropriate in his or her specific case, offering a public explanation for how, where, and why this sin had become manifest.

Thành began his speech to these intellectuals by pointing out the basic accomplishments of the “heroic” party: carrying out the August Revolution and leading the people in the resistance war.

If the Party is so perfect, why do we have to reform it? The reason is that, while there are a number of model party members, who put everything into

...serving the revolution, the people, and the [working] class, there are still a number, and that number is not small, of party members who do not correctly implement the Party and Government's policies, who do not follow correctly the line of the people, who are still hare-brained.

Those party members are not yet sound in character, so they must be reformed.¹⁴

Thành then addressed the notion, apparently common among DRV writers and artists, that the party did not appreciate or respect intellectuals. This was not true, he explained, since revolutionary parties needed teachers to raise the people's cultural level, doctors to raise the people's health, and engineers to develop technology. "In summary, the revolution really needs intellectuals, and, in actuality, only the revolution knows how to value intellectuals." In fact, Thành argued, "the only intellectuals who are able to develop, who are respected, and who are nurtured, are those in the Soviet Union and in the other new democratic countries."

As for DRV intellectuals, they had "many, of course not few, weaknesses that were the result of feudal-imperialist brainwashing and a divisive, slave-oriented education." More specifically, Thành stated, intellectuals were "individualistic, irresolute, hesitant, detached, conservative, self-deprecating, and status-conscious." To overcome these "weaknesses," what intellectuals needed to do first was carry out "thought reform."

After carrying out self-criticism, the first step in the reform, you will have a political standpoint with respect to which side you stand on. At that time, you will need to be resolute, determined, and solid.

Are you going to stand on the side of those who are oppressed—the workers and peasants—or are you going to stand on the side of the exploiters? You must make up your mind—you can't sit on two chairs.

Be sure! Be resolute! Are you going to stand on the side of the peasants or on that of the landlords? Probably you also know: What forces do the imperialists rely upon? Vietnamese traitors, feudalists, and landlords.

Who are the Vietnamese traitors? They are all feudal landlords, with a number of [Vietnamese traitors] coming from the ranks of the comprador bourgeoisie as well.¹⁵

Perhaps as a means of motivating his audience, which was composed of both party- and nonparty members, Thành spoke of major changes afoot. Part of that change would involve inviting people outside of the party's ranks to "participate in meetings, to speak, and to criticize."

If a Party member does not set a good example, a person outside the Party can speak up and say that he is not worthy of membership. Or those outside the party who act in an exemplary way can request that the Party recognize them as members.

The Party will become truly a Party of the popular masses. Only in this way can weaknesses be fixed and strengths developed.

The opportunist elements who entered the Party will be inspected by the Party and by the people. These opportunists will be purged and the Party will become purified, exemplary, and sincere in its service of the people and the revolution. All the new party members will become exemplary people, unifying and helping those people outside the Party.

That step is no longer far off for the Party.¹⁶

Foreshadowing the central role that denunciation would have in the coming mass mobilization, Thành's comment was a warning to DRV intellectuals that their positions were not secure.

The Three Mass Mobilization Directives: 149/SL, 150/SL, and 151/SL

As preparation for the land reform campaign, Thành, playing the role of Hồ Chí Minh, the democratically elected chairman of the DRV state, signed three decrees on May 12, 1953: (1) Decree 149/SL On Land Policy, (2) Decree 150/SL On the Establishment of Special People's Courts, and (3) Decree 151/SL On the Punishment of Landlords. These provided a legal veneer for the campaign. As with most DRV decrees, they began with the lines, "In consideration of current needs and following the resolution of the Council of Ministers after coming to agreement with the National Assembly Standing Committee . . ." Again, the idea was to make the impetus and content of the decrees seem to come from facts-on-the-ground analysis carried out by the Council of Ministers and the National Assembly rather than from Thành in response to pressure from Stalin and Mao. The three decrees, along with a related "edict" from the prime minister's office, appeared in *The People's* May 21, 1953 issue, which was specially devoted to the mass mobilization.¹⁷

Decree 149 on Land Policy

The first of the three decrees, "On Land Policy," contained 40 different clauses divided into eight sections dealing with such things as land and rent reduction; the distribution or handling of donated, public, uncultivated, or absentee-owner

land; and (in the final section) the creation of a government office for implementing land policy. Decree 149 on land policy stated, as the party leaders had agreed internally, that land rents were to be reduced by 25 percent from their level before the 1945 August Revolution and that landlords were not to demand in rent any more than one third of the harvest. The more important question was the extent to which rents could be reduced. “In the case of rented land being of poor quality or hard to farm, requiring a lot of work, the rent might need to be reduced by 50 percent or even more. This issue will be determined by the Peasant Association or through a peasant discussion session.”

“Decree 149/SL on Land Policy” had some interesting clauses dealing with debt reduction. The first part of the decree listed all the circumstances that would lead to the complete abolition of a debt. Three of the four were reasonable, but probably not especially meaningful for peasants. One stated that all debts accrued before 1945 were to be waived. It is hard to imagine that, by 1953, after the upheavals brought about by eight years of war, many peasants worried about having to pay a debt from 1944 or earlier. Perhaps more applicable was the clause stating that a debtor who had already paid back twice the value of the original loan would be absolved of having to make any further payment. It also seems to have been reasonable to dismiss the debts accrued by people who had died serving the war effort in some way. The most ominous clause, from the perspective of the coming mass mobilization, was the one stating that any debt owed to a person convicted of being a Vietnamese traitor would be abolished. In other words, for those who were in debt, Decree 149 provided a way out: denounce one’s lender as a Vietnamese traitor.

Decree 150: On the Establishment of Special People’s Courts

The mass mobilization campaign would operate outside the government’s normal judicial system, being served instead by a system of “Special People’s Courts” (*Tòa an Nhân dân Đặc biệt*). As Decree 150 explained, these courts were to be established as a temporary district-level (or interdistrict) judicial institution according to the recommendation of the provincial-level Resistance Committee and the approval of the Interzone-level Resistance Committee. The courts were to operate under the leadership of the provincial Resistance Committee and travel from sub-district to subdistrict in areas undergoing mass mobilization, passing judgement on cases in each locality. “When the Special People’s Court carries out its work, it must rely on the masses in a particular locale to help the court inspect and collect real evidence. And the court needs to deliver its verdicts quickly.”

What specifically were the cases that the Special People's Courts would try? Decree 150 listed three basic categories that fell under the traveling courts' jurisdiction:

- a. Punish counterrevolutionaries, cruel despots, and those who resist or sabotage the land policies.
- b. Adjudicate conflicts over property and land involved in the cases above [outlined in number one].
- c. Adjudicate conflicts over class demarcation.

The decree's sixth clause stated that "When questioning [a defendant], beating and torture must absolutely not be used." The ubiquity of "beating," "torture," and other forms of abuse during the campaign suggest that Thành and the Politburo inserted this clause primarily for propaganda purposes. Privately, they probably understood that torture would be necessary to obtain confessions in many cases because far too few actual landlords or traitors existed in DRV-controlled areas. How else other than through torture could mass mobilization cadres convince a loyal party member to confess to being a traitor or a Nationalist Party member? Publicly, "Hồ Chí Minh," the Politburo, and the DRV government could not appear to tolerate or advocate torture. Internally, they gave the mass mobilization apparatus a mission that could not be accomplished without it.

Decree 151: The Punishment of Landlords

The decree on the punishment of landlords contained fourteen clauses, which described various crimes and their punishments ranging from light (three to ten years in prison) to heavy (life imprisonment and execution). The lighter crimes, for the most part, included various actions that the accused landlord might take to save himself or otherwise "sabotage" the mass mobilization campaign. An important one in this category was "dispersing" (*phân tán*) his land and belongings in order to escape classification as a landlord:

In order to inspect and resolve correctly the conflicts over land that arise during the mobilization of the peasant masses, landlords may not disperse their property, belongings, or land in any of the following ways: pawn off, sell, give away, distribute as inheritance, or any other secret scheme.

Again, the Politburo's fear of not having enough targets for struggle is apparent. Landlords were also forbidden from slaughtering and eating their livestock,

from spreading antigovernment rumors, and from doing anything that would “damage the peasants’ unity.”

With respect to the more serious crimes, these included the following:

1. Allying with the imperialists, the puppet administration, or spies. Founding or leading reactionary organizations or political parties intended to fight against the government, to sabotage the resistance war, to hurt the people, and to murder the peasants, cadres, or government employees.
2. Allying with the imperialists and the puppet administration in order to establish or lead armed organizations for the purpose of insurrection.
3. Beating and injuring, beating to death, or assassinating peasants, cadres, or government employees.
4. Committing arson against houses, supply stores, food, harvested crops, or irrigation systems.
5. Inciting or leading a group of people to sow disorder.

These crimes could be punished by long prison terms or execution. However, as clause seven stated: “If a person who has committed any of the above crimes sincerely confesses to them before the crimes have been discovered, that person, depending on the seriousness of his crime and the genuineness of his repentance, will be treated with more leniency or even pardoned altogether.” This clause seems to have been aimed at tempting the accused into false confessions as a survival strategy. The false confessions would have the effect of affirming the party’s narrative of the countryside as riddled with traitors, spies, cruel landlords, Nationalist Party members, etc. As for the average person in the village, the directive stated that he “has the right and the responsibility to denounce any person he knows to have committed one of the above crimes.”

The Five Steps of Mass Mobilization at the Village Level

At some point in August of 1953, the Politburo became concerned about the length of time mass mobilization cadres were spending in villages. Thus, in September, Trường Chinh released a directive that explained in more detail the five steps of mass mobilization and even provided the number of days each step should require. The following is a condensed version of the document as it appears in the *Party Documents* series.

1. Step One (10 days): "Propagandize, educate, and strike root."

Propagandize. Upon entering his assigned village, the land reform cadre was to hold meetings with residents for the purpose of propagandizing the mass mobilization through rent reduction policy and its goal of preparing the way for land reform later. At these initial village meetings, the cadre was to announce "regulations" for the punishment of landlords who did not follow the law. Landlords were to be supervised as a means of preventing acts of sabotage from the "traitors" and "cruel despots" among their ranks. In order to "sow divisions among" (*phân hóa*) and to "settle down" the landlord class, the cadre was to announce that different types of landlords would be treated differently.

Educate. Trường Chinh wanted mass mobilization cadres to begin by educating members of the local party cell about the government's land policy and about the cell's responsibility during the mass mobilization process. After this, the cadre was to make members of the party cell carry out self-criticism with respect to their implementation, past and present, of the party and government's policies. Following this initial instruction and self-criticism, the mass mobilization cadre was to expel from the cell those who had committed "big mistakes." The rest were to either help investigate the "landlord situation" in the community or to take charge over monitoring the activities of "village bullies" so that, in the case of any trouble, the mass mobilization team could be notified in time.

Strike Roots. After educating and purging the local party cell, the mass mobilization cadre was to find one or two enthusiastic "roots" (*rễ*). This referred to members of the poor peasant class who could form the basis of a core group of "backbone" elements to lead the attack against the landlord class. As Chinh explained, mass mobilization cadres were to identify "one or two good people and carry out a preliminary mobilization of their thinking." After that, these "roots" were to recruit other poor locals to the cause. The land reform cadre was then to "divide up and investigate" these new people, train them and, if necessary and possible, "survey the masses" to find out what the broader community thought about these "backbone" recruits. As Chinh reassured the mass mobilization apparatus, "This method yields correct results and is also quick. In every subdistrict, find 15 to 20 people."¹⁸

2. Step Two (10 days): Hold study meetings with the roots and select the targets of struggle.

After the mass mobilization cadre had found his or her "roots," he or she was to bring them to the "focal point subdistrict" (*xã trọng điểm*) where they could

observe the mobilization process and further study its policies and goals. The majority of the mass mobilization cadres, unless they needed to remain in their communities to continue investigating the situation, were also to converge on the “focal point commune” to participate in the study sessions. These were to involve “speak bitterness” sessions to further “raise the class consciousness” of the local recruits and to teach the mass mobilization cadres more about the “landlord situation” in their assigned village.

After discussing the policy and the situation, the cadres and roots were to come up with a “concrete plan” for carrying out the mobilization in each sub-district. They were to determine which landlords would be targeted for struggle and which would be sent to the provincial authorities for study. According to Trường Chinh, “The mass mobilization team needs to verify and grasp the list of struggle targets (in each subdistrict, there should be from 1 to 3 people, except especially populous subdistricts of over 10,000 people, where 4 to 5 targets may be chosen and no more). If the number of landlords for struggle cannot be set during this phase, there is no need to force things as the number can be determined later.”

3. Step Three (10 days): “Organize the spreading of contacts [xâu chuôi] and carry out a preliminary reform of [political] organizations.”

According to Chinh’s instructions, the third step of mass mobilization would begin about three weeks after the cadre’s arrival in his or her assigned village:

After the roots have returned to their subdistricts, the district-level Party Committee will, basing itself on the list of struggle targets determined at the meeting, notify the Subdistrict Party Committee to announce the surveillance of those landlords selected to be targets of struggle. (This is to prevent them from carrying out sabotage, running away, or committing suicide.) As for the second- and third-rank cruel and despotic landlords who were not selected for struggle, the provincial-level Party Committee should announce that these landlords are to be sent to the provincial headquarters for study.

This, according to Chinh, had the advantage of reducing the concerns of the masses and reducing the incidence of suicide or sabotage. It also would help to avoid having the scope of the struggle broaden while the masses were being mobilized.¹⁹

It was during this third step (still only ten days) that the mass mobilization cadre was to make more contacts with poor peasants and to train them how to

carry out the “speak bitterness” sessions. This meant teaching local recruits how to speak about their lives using the party’s vocabulary of class warfare. All hardships were to be attributed, in one way or another, to the alleged crimes of landlords. The cadre was then to send these local recruits throughout the community to organize similar sessions, recruiting more adherents. When twenty percent of the local population had been recruited in this speak bitterness movement, the cadre was to announce the establishment of a new Peasants Association composed of these recruits. “Good” poor peasants who had been members of the old Peasant Association and who had participated in the speak bitterness sessions could become members of the new Peasant Association.

What was to happen to the “second-and third-rank cruel despotic landlords” who had been sent away to the province for study? The directive explained that the province-level Resistance Committee needed to “clearly point out their feudal crimes of oppression and exploitation, explain the policy to them, and state clearly the principle on which the Government shall deal with them.” As Trường Chinh explained, “only if they sincerely bow their heads and admit their crimes will they avoid being put before the peasants as a target of struggle.” If these “landlords” were compliant in that demand, they were to be forced to “carry out a self-criticism, to analyze it, and then to promise that they will implement the [party’s] policies.”²⁰

Indeed, the directive went on to command the Provincial Resistance Committee to “make a tally of truths about the landlords’ crimes and send it back to the subdistrict so that the tally can be compared with the peasants’ speak bitterness documents.” The mass mobilization cadre was supposed to check for discrepancies or places where the second and third rank landlords had “lacked thoroughness” in their confessions. If such an issue were found, the landlord would have to do his confession and analysis again. Even after completing their confessions with the Provincial Resistance Committee, these second-and third-rank landlords still had to return to their villages and issue a variety of different apologies to their “victims” individually and to the community publicly.²¹

4. Step Four (10–15 days): “Overthrow the cruel despots, redistribute the landlord’s belongings obtained through struggle.”

In the fourth step, roughly a month from the time the mass mobilization cadre had entered the village, he or she had to organize the struggle session(s) (*cuộc đấu*). Sharing characteristics of a staged show, the struggle session required the cadre to play the role of theater director. As the directive explained, “thorough preparations” had to be made for this crucial event. These included “prepping

the poor-peasant victims” so that they could deliver convincing public denunciations, collecting documents on the “crimes” of the landlords targeted for struggle, finding and organizing witnesses to verify the alleged crimes, and organizing the public meeting that was to become a struggle session. Once the meeting had been called and the stage properly set, with the selected landlords, their poor peasant denouncers, and the supporting witnesses in place before the gathered audience, the session was to “begin immediately.”²²

After the struggle session had begun, it was crucial that it be “victorious.” As Trường Chinh explained, “if the struggle session fails, immediately figure out the reasons why, mobilize the masses again, organize another struggle session, and do not stop until the struggle targets have been ‘knocked out’ (*bị ngã gục*).” As the party leaders repeatedly stressed, “when carrying out the struggle session, only arguments and the law should be used—the use of torture and beating is strictly forbidden.”²³

Another important clarification that Trường Chinh made about the struggle sessions was that they should be limited to the targets placed on the list during the general meeting of cadres and “roots” that occurred during the second step. Cadres “may not drag out for struggle people who were not originally set as struggle targets.” The focus was to be on a few “ring leaders” (*đầu sỏ*), the majority coming from the landlord class, and cadres were not allowed to deviate from the original plan and “expand the scope of the attack.” The Special People’s Courts were to be used primarily to support the cases that involved landlords targeted for the public struggle sessions.

Chinh provided only one instruction concerning the function of these mobile courts: “The Special People’s Court should coordinate with the struggle sessions, trying the cases in a timely fashion.” That was the only sentence in the entire directive about how these makeshift courts were to function. There was no mention, for example, of how cadres and members of the Special People’s Court might work together to consider the various cases or what the procedure would be if disagreement occurred between the two sides. The ability to judge cases “rapidly” to maintain the remarkable speed of the mass mobilization process seems to have been the most valued quality of the court.²⁴

Some of the important secondary tasks of the mass mobilization for rent reduction were to be carried out at roughly the same time as the struggle sessions. “During the period of the struggle sessions or after their conclusion, cadres should immediately carry out rent reduction, the collection of back rents, and the reduction of debts.” This was also the time to confiscate the land and property of “French imperialists, Vietnamese traitors, reactionaries, and the first

rank of cruel despots against whom the struggle was to be aimed.” As for the other “Vietnamese traitors,” the directive explained, the masses would subsequently supply evidence (“documents”) to the local police, who would then carry out further investigations, with the cases being decided in the normal “people’s courts.” The period after the conclusion of the struggle session was also the time to deal with the second- and third-rank landlords who had recently returned from their “study” session with the provincial Resistance Committee. Their cases were also to be handled by the local police and normal courts.

The final task of the fourth step was the redistribution of the land and property that had been confiscated from “Vietnamese traitors, reactionaries, and cruel despots.” Chinh instructed that land was to be distributed on a temporary rather than permanent basis during the mass mobilization for rent reduction. (During the coming land reform phase of the mass mobilization, the land would all be redistributed on a permanent basis.) With respect to the confiscated belongings (“buffalos, farm tools, rice, etc.”), this was to be distributed among the community according to need and as fairly as possible. At the same time, though, the mass mobilization cadre had to provide some special privileges in this matter to the “poor-peasant victims” (*khố chủ*) who had done the lion’s share of the denouncing during the struggle session. Therefore, they were to receive (a perhaps disappointing) ten to twenty percent of the goods obtained from the struggle target whom they denounced.²⁵

5. Step Five: “Reorganize local Party cell, educate the masses, and divide up the subdistrict.”

The primary task of this final step was the “reorganization” of the local party cell. For the most part, this reorganization was to involve the expulsion of “landlords” from the party, but this was not always the case. If a landlord seemed to merit staying in the party, he could be permitted to do so, but he had to be sent to another region to work. “Young intellectual” party members who were the offspring of landlords and who wanted to “improve themselves,” were also to be sent out of the village. But, interestingly, they were to be sent to a mass mobilization brigade (rent reduction or, later, land reform) in some other locality to work as cadres for the campaign.

Another secondary task of the mass mobilization was the partitioning of the subdistrict. It might be split into two subdistricts, with a new name given to one or both parts. Similarly, villages that had originally been a part of one subdistrict might be cut off and joined together with nearby villages that had belonged to a different subdistrict. The creation of new administrative boundaries provided

an opportunity for the establishment of new political organizations, reinforcing the overall theme of change in the countryside brought about by the mass mobilization.²⁶

And finally, the mass mobilization cadre needed to take the time during this last step “to educate the masses, to make the bulk of the peasant masses truly recognize that Chairman Hồ, the Workers’ Party, the Government, and the people’s army belong to them and serve them—and through that recognition, the masses shall gain the determination to follow Chairman Hồ and the Party.”²⁷

Propagandizing the Land Reform

Nguyễn Thị Năm (1906–1953), the most famous target of the land reform campaign, came from a family of traders who lived in a Hanoi suburb. As a young woman, she married the son of a wealthy businessman in Haiphong. According to the scholar Alex Thai Vo, Thị Năm’s husband quickly proved to be a poor partner both romantically and financially. A heavy opium addiction combined with frequent philandering led him to burn steadily through his ample inheritance, forcing his smart and beautiful wife to assume the role of family breadwinner. She began with a noodle shop and then shifted to the scrap metal business, soon accumulating enough money to establish her own trading company named Cát-Hanh-Long. Her success in the metal trade earned her the moniker, “Queen of Iron.” In 1943, Thị Năm purchased the largest plantation in northern Vietnam. Located in the middle of Thái Nguyên province, about 50 kilometers due north of Hanoi, the estate became a favored source of hospitality and protection for top party leaders during the dangerous years of the Second World War.¹

The Vietnamese historian Dương Trung Quốc explains that Thị Năm met the party leaders through an early friendship in Haiphong with the revolutionary writer, Nguyễn Đình Thi. Highly patriotic, Thị Năm became a supporter of the party; her two sons joined the revolutionary movement and became officers in the People’s Liberation Army. Dương Trung Quốc only mentions the party leaders Võ Nguyên Giáp and Nguyễn Chí Thanh as having enjoyed the hospitality of her plantation in Thái Nguyên province.² But other sources suggest that her guest list was broader. The managing editor of *The People*, Hoàng Tùng, for example, writes that Politburo members Trường Chinh, Hoàng Quốc Việt, and Lê Đức Thọ “frequently had meals at her house.”³

In addition to offering party members the use of her estate in Thái Nguyên province and supporting her two sons’ involvement in revolutionary activities, Thị Năm provided the early DRV government with financial support. Looking

back at the revolutionary newspaper *Democracy*, which was run by party members in Haiphong, we see a front-page article about Thị Năm in the September 29, 1945 issue. The title of the article is “The Gold Record has been Broken! Ms. Cat-Hanh-Long Donates 110 *lượng* of Gold.”⁴ This was a reference to the party’s “gold week” campaign carried out from September 16 to 23 (primarily in Hanoi and Haiphong, it appears) to encourage donations to the regime.

In light of the false accusations later leveled at Thị Năm during the land reform, another important piece of evidence about her life is a September 1944 article about her estate. The article, written by the respected Hanoi intellectual and future DRV supporter Vũ Đình Hòe, was published in his left-leaning journal, *Forum*. To research his article, Hòe spent a day at Thị Năm’s plantation, interviewing its manager extensively and also questioning some of its tenant farmers. Thị Năm’s manager stated that he had been given “full power of decision” at the estate. It does not appear that Thị Năm or anyone in her family spent much time at the property in the years after purchasing it. In his investigation of the estate’s tenant farmers, Hòe found them to be poor and struggling. However, this stemmed mostly from the estate’s overall deterioration and from Vietnam’s economic struggles at the time. According to Hòe’s research, these farmers paid thirty percent of their harvest to Thị Năm’s estate. This was comparable to the maximum land-rent rate put forward by Trường Chinh in his 1952 party directive on land rents.⁵

In 1947, the party leaders had shifted their secret headquarters from Bắc Cạn province to a remote location in the middle of Thái Nguyên province only about 30 kilometers west of Thị Năm’s plantation. How it happened that the party leaders chose Thị Năm to be the model “cruel and despotic landlord,” whose trial and execution would kick off the land reform, remains unclear. The managing editor of *The People*, Hoàng Tùng, was apparently invited to attend many Politburo meetings, including the one during which Thị Năm was chosen for this unfortunate propaganda role. In later years, Tùng provided a brief description of what he claimed to remember:

The decision to have Nguyễn Thị Năm as the first person [to be targeted in the land reform as a cruel and despotic landlord] was the result of someone having suggested her to the Chinese advisers. At the Politburo meeting, Uncle [i.e., Nguyễn Tất Thành] said: “I agree that a person who has committed crimes needs to be tried, but I think it is immoral if the first bullet is aimed at a woman, especially when that person has helped the revolution. The French say not to strike a woman, even if one hits her with a flower.”

Afterward, the Chinese adviser La Quý Ba [Luo Guibo] continued to insist, and Uncle said: “I will follow the majority, but of course I still think it is not right.” And they just continued to do it.⁶

Other observers, notably Nguyễn Quang Duy, in his article “Hồ Chí Minh’s Role in the Land Reform,”⁷ have, by looking at the written record, raised questions about the plausibility of Hoàng Tùng’s account.

Over a span of four and a half months, from March 1 to July 21, 1953, *The People* published six articles about the struggle against Thị Năm. The first five were long, journalistic “accounts” of what was allegedly transpiring with her case. The author of those articles was a young man named Trần Đĩnh. Sixty-one years later in 2014, he published a memoir (*Turning Lamp: The Fate of Vietnam under the Communist Regime*) in which he discussed the episode.

Two aspects of Đĩnh’s account of the Nguyễn Thị Năm case seem especially significant. The first is his claim never to have attended any of her struggle sessions, which he described so vividly and dramatically in his *The People* articles. His boss, Trường Chinh, had apparently told Đĩnh that he could base his articles on information gleaned from cadre reports of the struggle sessions.⁸ The detail reflects the fantastical nature of the mass mobilization. It apparently mattered little to Chinh whether an eyewitness account of Thị Năm’s struggle sessions had been written by an actual eyewitness—her case had been fabricated for propaganda purposes, anyway. A second intriguing detail from the Đĩnh memoir is that Thành and Trường Chinh had donned disguises and secretly attended at least one of the Thị Năm struggle sessions.⁹

The sixth of the *The People* articles written about the Nguyễn Thị Năm case was penned by Thành himself under his pseudonym “C.B.” This was the name that he frequently used for his Leninist-flavored column titled “Speak and Listen” (*Nói mà nghe*). Thành’s article appeared in the July 21 issue of *The People*—according to Võ’s calculations, this was about a week after Thị Năm and four other family members and friends had been executed by firing squad.¹⁰ Thành titled his article, “The Landlord is Cruel and Horrifying.” His assessment was entirely in the spirit of the five earlier Trần Đĩnh articles, the idea being to promote Thị Năm as a symbol for the entire landlord class:

The gentle saints teach us that: “Muck and money go together.” Everybody knows that landlords are cruel: exploiting the peasants with high land rents and high-interest loans—a lazy tax collector. But now, imagine landlords who *kill people without blinking an eye*. Here is an example:

The landlord hag Cát-hanh-Long along with her two children and a few other henchmen:

Murdered 14 peasants.

Tortured and beat dozens of peasants who are now disabled.

Caused the death of 32 families totaling roughly 200 people [...]

Raped to death [*hãm chết*] over 30 peasants [...]

So, the family of the landlord Cát-hanh-Long either directly or indirectly murdered around 260 of our countrymen!¹¹

The second part of Thành's article focused on alleged methods of torture practiced by Thị Năm and her supporters in the village of Đông Bẩm; this essentially rehashed what had already been described in the earlier articles about the case in *The People*: tying the peasants up and hanging them from the rafters of her house, jamming cattle prods into their mouths, pumping water into their stomachs and then stomping on them, using candles to burn the peasants' skin, forcing fish sauce into people's noses, carrying out the water-drip torture, and others. These were fabrications.

The third and final part of Thành's article shifted to Nguyễn Thị Năm's "counterrevolutionary crimes" directed against the DRV:

A few years back, she and her son formed an alliance with the French and the Japanese in order to arrest cadres. After the August Revolution, they allied with the French enemy and with the Vietnamese traitors in order to sabotage the resistance war.

During the mass mobilization [in Đông Bẩm], our countrymen in that locale put forward enough clear evidence in their accusations. The hag Cát-hanh-Long and her son could not deny the evidence, and they admitted as true all of the crimes against the country and the people. Truly:

Even if one cuts down all the bamboo in the forest for paper, it is still not enough to document all her crimes.

Even if one uses all the water in the ocean, her cruelty cannot be washed clean.

C.B.¹²

It is apparent from Nguyễn Thị Năm's case that the use of half-truths, distortions, and slander—what Thành and other party leaders would later refer to as the "errors" of land reform cadres—began at the top and was transmitted down to cadres recruited to carry out the campaign.

Propagandizing the Mass Mobilization

In addition to fine-tuning their mass mobilization policies during 1953, the party leaders needed to develop a propaganda strategy that would facilitate the campaign's smooth implementation. For example, a circular released on June 29, 1953 titled "On the Issue of Propagandizing the Mass Mobilization," explained how the initial "rent reduction" part of the mass mobilization was to be publicized. The circular began by describing the impetus for the party's propaganda strategy:

Based on the situation in a number of places, the Central Committee sees that we have not yet propagandized and explained carefully our decrees, land edicts, and mass mobilization orders. Even a number of leading cadres do not yet fully understand the Party and Government's policy and mass mobilization line. Because of this, a number of spontaneous struggles have broken out. There are places where landlords have been beaten and tortured. Even middle peasants, poor peasants, officials, students, etc., have become targets of struggle. In those places, there always occur incidents of landlords committing suicide. Even among rich, middle, and poor peasants there are those who fear becoming targets of struggle and therefore commit suicide. Those are incidents of disorderly struggle, with no strategy and no leadership. They have neither the right intention nor the right struggle target.¹³

The circular then explained that, while some of these phenomena were unavoidable and "natural" results of class struggle, an effective propaganda campaign should reduce their incidence. In order to calm those who feared becoming targets of the campaign:

We must propagandize and explain our policy clearly to landlords and rich peasants so they know that everybody who follows the policy has nothing to worry about—the Government and the peasants only punish those who don't follow the laws and who don't show repentance.

After explaining the impetus for the party's propaganda strategy, the circular put forward some ground rules for depicting the mass mobilization. With respect to the "fruits" of struggle (items taken from those people labeled as landlords), newspapers were only to mention "land, buffalos, and rice . . . taken from reactionary and cruel landlords" and not to mention "gold, jewels, clothing, etc." On the key issue of how landlord executions were to be handled, the circular instructed:

Only propagandize executions of the most extreme arch criminals. Normally, executions should not be propagandized. Executions should only be propagandized in newspapers or by other means such as word of mouth, etc. They should not be announced over the radio.

Another part of the circular cautioned that “the execution of cruel despotic female landlords should not be publicized because the enemy could exploit it to counter our propaganda.” Propagandizing executions in the press or in meetings “should not create unnecessary alarm in society but rather court public sympathy.” Regarding the procedure for propagandizing an execution, the circular stated:

In summary, propagandizing executions must be done carefully. Mass mobilization brigades should send documents about big important struggles and executions to the Central Committee’s Propaganda and Instruction Bureau so that it can then send the information on to various newspapers.¹⁴

DRV journalists were to depict the campaign in the way that the party leaders thought would facilitate the campaign’s smooth implementation—such as by promising a nervous DRV population that everyone who followed the law would have “nothing to worry about.”

However, the party’s internal discussions of the campaign tell a different story. A Politburo directive released on May 4, 1953 stated that the VWP leaders wanted to see the execution of one person for every thousand people during the more moderate rent-reduction phase of the mass mobilization.¹⁵ In other words, the party leaders had decided roughly how many people should be executed during rent reduction before cadres had entered their respective villages, before they had had an opportunity to determine whether so-called landlords were law-abiding and “repentant” or not.

Extrapolated for the roughly eight million people who went through rent reduction in the DRV, the May 4, 1953 directive indicates that the Politburo wanted its mass mobilization apparatus to execute about eight thousand people during this initial moderate phase of the campaign.¹⁶ We do not know whether the Politburo also applied an execution ratio to the campaign’s more radical land reform phase, when the landlord class was to be “completely overthrown” (*triệt để đánh đổ*). Whether or not this was the case, it seems reasonable to conclude that the party leaders planned for the land reform phase to involve the execution of more than eight thousand people (i.e., have an execution ratio greater than the rent reduction phase’s 1 per 1000.) Since Vietnam’s Communist Party

leaders continue to maintain a policy of secrecy regarding the mass mobilization campaign's overall death toll, we are forced to estimate the toll based largely on intentions. Those intentions suggest that a toll of fifteen to twenty-five thousand deaths is a reasonable estimate.¹⁷

Evidence that the VWP leadership wanted to conceal the scope and character of the mass mobilization campaign from the public appears in a number of different internal documents. For example, Thành, during his closing remarks at the Fifth Meeting of the Party Central Executive Committee and the First All-Country Meeting of Party Representatives (November 14–23, 1953) gave those representatives in attendance instructions regarding the upcoming land reform:

Now, on returning home, you may not speak loosely [*nói lung tung*] because this [policy] is a secret of our strategy to attack feudalism, to carry out land reform. If all of you shoot your mouths off before we have made preparations [*sắp sửa*], the enemy and the landlords will be able to make preparations before we do. For this reason, the Central Committee will issue a directive explaining how the land reform should be propagandized in general for all regions and how it should be propagandized specifically for regions that have yet to undergo mobilization.¹⁸

Later in the speech, Thành again stressed the need for secrecy:

With respect to those of you from regions that have not yet undergone mobilization as well as those of you from other regions, you may not talk about this. You must keep it a secret. When you, as representatives, return [to your regions], you must report [the contents of this meeting] only to the Zone Party Committee and to no one else. Afterwards, it will be up to the Zone Party Committee to consider carefully the issue of to whom and to what extent the [land reform] policy will be disseminated. You are not to “blab” about either this report or the policy. Are all of you clear on this? You absolutely must remember this.¹⁹

As Thành had promised, nineteen days later, on December 12, 1953, the Central Committee released a directive titled “On Propagandizing the Land Reform Policy.” Written by Trường Chinh, it contained two main sections. The first discussed the “mission and content” of land reform propaganda and the second dealt with the “method of implementation.” For those with the most at stake in the mass mobilization, the so-called landlords, Chinh explained that propaganda should “make them see that the land reform is just, appropriate, and legal;

land worked by the peasants naturally should be returned to the peasants.” To ease the minds of those who feared becoming struggle targets (lest they flee or commit suicide), the party general secretary instructed people involved in propaganda work to stress that:

[T]he Government differentiates in its treatment of each type of landlord according to his attitude toward the resistance and the people—of course landlords are not all lumped into one category [*vớ đũa cả năm*]. The goal is to isolate the traitorous, reactionary, cruel, and despotic landlords, thereby stabilizing the morale of revolutionary and normal landlords. This should prevent the landlord class from taking measures to resist the policy and sabotage production.

In the section of the directive that described how the party leaders wanted the land reform to be propagandized in those places about to undergo the campaign, Chinh explained:

With respect to propagandizing and studying the land reform policy in these places, there is no need to organize study sessions, as was usually done in the past. When the land reform team enters the village to carry out land reform, it will organize sessions to study the policy then.²⁰

Thus, it appears that the key details of the campaign were to be revealed only after the land reform team had arrived and members of the community (especially those targeted for struggle) were unable to leave.

Legalizing the Land Reform: December 1953

Another aspect of the party leaders’ overall propaganda strategy was the diffusion of public responsibility for the land reform throughout the government. In November and December of 1953, Thành and his comrades held meetings with as many of the regime’s leaders and representatives as possible to obtain “approval” for the land reform campaign, building toward the release of an official Land Reform Law. From that point forward, the DRV press organs would usually refer to the mass mobilization campaign as the policy of the government and National Assembly.

The first of these meetings, the 5th Plenum of the Party Executive, took place from November 14 to 23, 1953. It was followed by the larger First All-Nation Meeting of Party Representatives.²¹ In what appears to be an attempt to give agency to the larger, second meeting, *The People* reported that “The First

All-Nation Meeting [of Party Representatives] established the world and domestic situations and came to a decision on an issue of special importance: In 1954, implementation of land reform will begin.”²²

Approval from United Vietnam and the National Assembly

On November 26, three days after the conclusion of the two party meetings mentioned above, it was the turn of the United Vietnam Association to share in the responsibility for the land reform. This meeting was reported in the December 16, 1953 issue of *The People* in the article, “The Meeting of the United Vietnam Committee Succeeded Spectacularly.” The long article on the meeting had two subheadings, which together seem to reflect the overall propaganda purpose of the meeting. The first was “A Spirit of Democratic Negotiation;” the second was “Unified and Unanimous.” What did “democratic negotiation” mean in the DRV?

In the rooms used by the representatives, [one could see] their gray heads huddled together. There was Mr. Thi-Sơn, who had participated in the anti-French struggle alongside Đê Thám and who is now in the United Vietnam Front taking part in the resistance war. [With him] were Mr. Phan Kế Toại, the Minister of the Interior, the bishop Vũ Xuân Kỳ, and the High Buddhist Monk [thượng tọa] Phạm-thế-Long sharing ideas about church land, pagoda land, and about the approach to different ranks of landlord. Next to the meeting hall were Mrs. Phạm-quỳnh-Anh, an old revolutionary with nearly 40 years’ experience [serving the cause], Mr. Vũ-đình-Tụng, head of the Ministry of Injured Veterans, Mr. Vũ-đình-Hòe, head of the Ministry of Justice and a central committee member of the Democratic Party, Mr. Hoàng-tích-Tri, head of Ministry of Health, and Dr. Phạm Ngọc Thạch who just arrived from the South. They were engaged in a rigorous discussion about the land that would be distributed to injured veterans and about the method of carrying out compulsory sales [*trưng mua*] of land.²³

The image of venerable old luminaries, mostly of non-Communist background, so intimately involved in discussing and approving the land reform policy, seems to have been carefully constructed in *The People* to give the campaign a benign appearance. Another theme of the image was the extreme care taken by members of United Vietnam to scrutinize every last detail of the land reform policy:

From basic principles to the details of implementation, the Party always sought the opinion of the [United Vietnam] representatives. There were

a few issues related to implementation that, because the Party did not yet have enough practical documentation, the Meeting decided to research further. The Party's way of working was extremely meticulous and carefully considered. The Party's respect for the ideas of the United Vietnam representatives not only demonstrated the spirit of democratic negotiation at the Meeting but also enabled everyone to see clearly the appropriateness of the revolutionary line set forth by Chairman Hồ and the Central Committee.²⁴

The second subheading, "Unified and Unanimous," was followed by descriptions of members of United Vietnam listening to accounts of the peasants' "bloody struggle" against the landlord class, past and present. "Everybody saw that the time had come to abolish the landlord regime of land occupation, to implement a policy of land to the tiller, to liberate the forces of production in the countryside, and to push forward the resistance war and national construction."²⁵

The article continued in this vein with approving quotes from various members of United Vietnam. It was supplemented by another article, "Democratic Parties, People's Mass Organizations, and Democratic Personalities in the Front Enthusiastically Support the Land Reform Policy." The entirety of the newspaper's third page and part of its fourth were devoted to a collage of one-to-two-paragraph quotes. All were from United Vietnam members and expressed enthusiastic support for the land reform.

The overall impression of the United Vietnam articles was that, in the land reform, rural elites who had contributed to the resistance war might be forced to sell some of their land to the DRV state, but little more. These articles included no mention of the terms "public denunciation" or "Special People's Court." *The People* had already published articles describing in some detail the "struggle session" against the female landowner Nguyễn Thị Năm and a few other "landlords," so this aspect of the campaign was not a secret. But it is obvious that the party leaders, at this time, wanted the coming land reform to appear as benign as possible. Again, I believe that the primary motive behind this propaganda tactic was fear of losing targets for struggle.

On December 1, 1953, a day or two after the completion of the United Vietnam Association meeting, it was the turn of the National Assembly. To call its members together at this time was extraordinary because the assembly had not met since December of 1946, just before the outbreak of the war. For the last seven years, the party leaders had simply used the National Assembly Standing Committee to provide formal approval of party-generated laws.²⁶ The December

26, 1953 “special issue” of *The People* was devoted almost entirely to the National Assembly and its passage of the Land Reform Law. The issue essentially followed the same form used in the newspaper’s December 21, 1953 issue on the United Vietnam Association. Indeed, the main article on the National Assembly was written by the same party journalist, Xuân Trường, who had written the main United Vietnam article.

Thus, members of the National Assembly also held “rigorous discussions” and the favored motif of “gray heads” hard at work, studying the details of the land reform policy, was again used as it had been in *The People’s* coverage of the United Vietnam meeting. Xuân Trường noted that members of the National Assembly approved the notion that, “for political reasons, we must distinguish between and treat differently each landlord according to his political attitude, meaning that we need to carry out forced purchases of land belonging to democratic notables, resistance-war landlords, and normal landlords.” Yet again, *The People* laid out a collage of supportive quotes from a wide variety of National Assembly members. The newspaper described the National Assembly’s final act related to the land reform campaign:

At the end of the part devoted to discussion, the National Assembly signaled agreement with the report of Đỗ Đức Dục, the head of the subcommittee for the approval of draft laws. At that point, Mr. Trần-công-Tuởng, Deputy Minister of Law, rose and read aloud the entirety of the land reform law. . . . With complete unanimity, [the National Assembly] approved the land reform law. . . . The slogans “Chairman Hồ forever” and “All Hail the National Assembly” echoed forth. . . . The song “Hồ Chí Minh” rose up. The slogans “Long Live Hồ Chí Minh,” “We Will Win the Resistance War,” and “The Land Reform Will Succeed,” could be heard on top of each other echoing forth. It was as though everybody wanted to shout out to express their happiness.²⁷

For readers of *The People* who came from elite rural families and who were working in some capacity for the DRV state, the general thrust of the newspaper’s two issues dealing with the United Vietnam and National Assembly’s approval of the Land Reform Law was one of reassurance.

The Land Reform Law

A close examination of the Land Reform Law itself, however, reveals a few elements that might have caused anxiety. The law had all the formal appearance of a “bourgeois democratic” legal document, with chapters, subsections, and clauses.

But the content of the document departed from a democratic legal tradition in both principle and spirit. The law also contained some subtle contradictions that shed light on the thinking of the party leaders. Again, when considered together, the odd aspects of the document seem to reflect the overriding fear of the party leaders that the actual situation on the ground would not furnish enough landlords to make the land reform meaningful.

The Land Reform Law had thirty-eight clauses divided into five chapters. The first was titled “The Goal and Meaning of Land Reform.” It repeated the standard line on the campaign’s economic and political goals: the elimination of French colonialist, Vietnamese traitor, and Vietnamese feudalist land ownership; the “liberation of productive forces” in the countryside so as to boost agriculture; and the improvement of peasant livelihood—all of which would contribute to “pushing forward” the resistance war and national reconstruction.

In light of the party leaders’ enthusiastic and unequivocal internal discussions about the necessity of moving away from private ownership of land to a system of collectivized agriculture, the Land Reform Law’s forceful affirmation of the principle of private property is noteworthy. As the law stated, “to implement a system of peasant ownership of land” was the first of the four goals that would be achieved with the elimination of “colonial,” “traitor,” and “feudal” land ownership in the countryside.

The second of the Land Reform Law’s five chapters was titled, “Confiscation, Requisition, and Compulsory Sale of Land.” As clause 4 of that section explained, the price that the DRV state would pay for “compulsory sales” levied on “democratic personalities, resistance war landlords, and normal landlords” would be, for land, the equivalent of an average year’s yield, and for belongings, the current market price. Given the dire state of the DRV’s finances and the party’s plans to collectivize agriculture, there was little possibility of actually paying for these “compulsory sales.” Officially, payment would come in the form of a ten-year government bond set at a yearly interest rate of 1.5 percent. In reality, the party leaders probably mentioned this bond for the sake of form only.

The third section of the second chapter contained what was arguably the law’s greatest departure from a democratic legal tradition. Clause 5 of that section stated:

From the day when the rent reduction decree was promulgated (14/7/1949) to the day when the decree on the mass mobilization for complete rent reduction (12/4/1953) was released, any landlord’s dispersal [*phân tán*] of land with the goal of avoiding the rent reduction decree and the agricultural tax decree, shall be considered illegitimate.

However, looking back upon the July 1949 Rent Reduction decree (*sắc lệnh 78/SL*), we see that it covers only land rents. There is no mention of land sales, so it was “legal” according to the regime’s own laws for anybody to buy or sell land, regardless of motive. Now, according to the Land Reform Law, the purchaser of a “landlord’s” property after 1949 would have that land “confiscated, requisitioned, or seized through compulsory sale according to each situation.”

Similarly, according to clause 6 of the Land Reform Law: “From the day when the mass mobilization for rent-reduction decree was promulgated (12/4/1953), the illegal dispersal of land by landlords shall not be accepted.” However, as with the decree from July 1949, the more recent April 1953 rent reduction decree in no way forbade the purchase or sale of land. In fact, clause 14 of that decree stated that “when a landowner sells land: (a) the tenant farmer who is renting that land has the first right of purchase and may pay for the land gradually. (b) the tenant farmer has the right to demand that the owner pay him for work done converting uncultivated land into arable land.”

Since there is nothing in this April 1953 Rent Reduction decree outlawing the sale or purchase of land, the description of such an action in the Land Reform Law as “illegal” violates the principle outlawing *ex post facto* (or retroactive) laws. A state, upon promulgating a new law, may only apply that law to actions moving forward—it may not use that new law as a basis for taking legal action on acts committed before the law had been passed.²⁸

The fourth chapter of the land reform law was titled “The Executive Office and the Method of Implementing the Land Reform.” This section addressed the crucial issue of class demarcation. Obviously, the class that a family was assigned during the land reform was going to determine that family’s fate. Therefore, the criteria used to determine class were of the utmost importance from the perspective of the rural population, especially the better-off members of a community. Yet the Land Reform Law provided no concrete information on this issue, no quantitative or qualitative measure that could be used by a family to determine whether they would be classified as “rich peasants” or “landlords.” As clause 34 stated:

- When determining class, it must be done according to the regulations for class demarcation in the countryside set by the Government.
- Class will be discussed and determined at a meeting of peasant representatives. A person whose class is being determined must be allowed to attend the meeting and participate in the discussion.
- A subdistrict’s decision on class demarcation must be approved either by the provincial level Resistance Committee or by an office delegated by that committee.

- Should a conflict arise, the case must be given to the Special People's Court for resolution.

The Land Reform Law contained no wording that might restrict or tie the hands of the regime in its assignment of class to the rural population.

The vagueness of this official law stands in stark contrast to the quantitative precision that we see within the reports produced by the mass mobilization apparatus. The reports on the campaign, produced primarily by brigade and team leaders, were full of numbers, percentages, and quantitative analysis related to the issue of class. Below is the opening summary of a report on the results of the second wave of the Mass Mobilization through Rent Reduction. It was written on December 16, 1953 by Hoàng Hữu Nhân, the head of the Second Mass Mobilization Brigade operating in the Vietnamese North. This was only fifteen days before the publication of the Land Reform Law in *The People*.

MASS MOBILIZATION BRIGADE
THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM
The Vietnamese North Interzone
Independence, Freedom, Happiness
REPORT

Brigade 2's Mass Mobilization Work for Wave 2 and Preparations for Wave 3.

The details concerning the execution of each part of wave 2 and the preparations for wave 3 we have already reported. Here, we are only giving a general summary and putting forward the key features of the following:

1. The results of wave 2 of mass mobilization
2. The summing-up meeting for wave 2 of mass mobilization
3. Preparations for wave 3.

THE RESULTS OF MASS MOBILIZATION WAVE 2:

Wave 2 of the mass mobilization was carried out in 40 subdistricts that were a part of 6 districts located in the 2 provinces of Thái Nguyên and Bắc Giang. Thái Nguyên had 33 subdistricts belonging to the 4 districts of Đông Hỷ, Đại Từ, Phú Bình, and Phú Lương. [In the province of] Bắc Giang, there were 7 subdistricts belonging to the two districts of Yên Thế and Lạng Giang. All these included 29,972 families, 141,373 people. The population of the smallest subdistrict was 927 and [of] the largest was 12,012. The amount of farmland was 71,423 mẫu.

The number of landlord families was 652, and we brought out for public denunciation 52 of them, that is, 56 people. (The subdistrict with the most people brought out for public denunciation had 4 and the least, 1). Relative to the total number of landlords, we brought out for public denunciation 8%. [Aside from them, the Special People's Court] tried 72 people, 5 of whom were given the death penalty, 67 of whom were given prison sentences from 3 to 20 years. Among the 40 subdistricts, there were 4 that had no targets for struggle: Tân Phú, Phú Cường, Hoàng Sơn, and Đồng Tiến subdistricts. There were 82 second- and third-rank cruel despotic landlords sent to the provincial [resistance committee headquarters] for study. In addition to the 56 landlords who were struggled against, there were 2 who committed suicide.

Through mass mobilization we discovered some political incidents [*vụ chính trị*]. There were some cases that we did not know about before or only knew about vaguely with no concrete [details]. Now, having found clues, we carried out deep investigations, finding their organization. For example: with respect to the Thị Sa case and the sabotage of Phong Bridge case, we have only just seen clearly that the landlords function as an espionage base for the imperialists.

After the struggle, landlords and rich peasants were compelled to hand over 1,206 tons of rice. We reduced this amount by 193 tons based on their ability to pay, leaving 1,012 tons. Currently, we have collected 850 tons. The "fruits" confiscated were distributed to 8,682 peasant families, 2,493 of which were landless peasants, 4,532 of which were poor peasants, 1,217 were middle peasants, and 440 of which were local poor. The number of families who were given "fruits" comprised 29% of the total number of families. The number of landless and poor peasants comprised 123.5% [*sic*].

Organization:

Division of communes: 40 old subdistricts have been divided up into 84 new subdistricts.

The consolidation of Party cells:

Party members. Before reorganization there were 3,504 party members: 41 workers, 38 landless peasants, 675 poor peasants, 2,159 middle peasants, 352 rich peasants, 93 landlords, 117 petit bourgeois. Of the total number of party members, 448 were found to be former bullies [*kỳ hào cũ*], occupying 12% of the Party cell.

Through the reorganization we dealt with 344 people: 6 poor peasants, 113 middle peasants, 129 rich peasants, 89 landlords, and 7 small owners.

The number of party members belonging to different categories: members of reactionary organizations, 3; members of the exploitative class, 255; corrupt and depraved, 52; serious violations of the law, 6; and 30 party members received warnings. Of the 344 party members, 38 asked permission to withdraw from the party.²⁹

This final report of the Second Mass Mobilization Brigade continues in this vein, applying these same quantitative measures of class composition to the party cell Executive Committee, to the Peasant Association, to the People's Committee, to the People's Militia, and to the local Public Security office. The Land Reform Law, on the other hand, was completely devoid of this type of quantitative discourse.

Hoàng Hữu Nhân's report and others available for viewing in the archives suggest that the party leaders and their Chinese advisors monitored and measured the success of the campaign mostly by the numbers. How many people were in a subdistrict? How many landlords were found? How many of them were made targets of struggle? What percentage of the total number of landlords was that? How many prison sentences were there? How many people were purged from the local party cell and from the Peasant Association? What percentage of these two organizations do poor peasants now comprise?

Culture and the Mass Mobilization

Nguyễn Tất Thành, Trường Chinh, Phạm Văn Đồng, Võ Nguyên Giáp, and other party leaders viewed culture through the lens of Marxism-Leninism. They saw cultural production as inherently political—there was no such thing as “art for art's sake.” Works of art always reflected the values and interests of a particular class, usually the class that financed the art. The inseparability of culture and politics meant that a political revolution had to be accompanied by a cultural one. Since they, the party leaders, understood and served the interests of the working class, they had the right to determine whether cultural production (literature, art, music, etc.) served that class.

As the scholar Kim Ninh points out, Vietnam's party leaders during the early 1940s obtained a copy of Mao Zedong's influential 1940 article, “On New Democracy,” and made it the basis of their own cultural policy.³⁰ In March 1943, Trường Chinh distilled Mao's main ideas from “On New Democracy” into a brief “Outline on Vietnamese Culture.” As Chinh explained, culture included “ideology, education, and art” and rested upon “a society's economic base and

accompanying economic system.” Culture, economics, and politics formed the Indochinese Communist Party’s “three fronts” and therefore were to be under the party’s control: “the vanguard party must lead the vanguard culture.”

In his 1943 outline, Chinh listed Mao’s “three principles of cultural mobilization.” The first was to “nationalize” the country’s culture, which meant “opposing the slave and colonial mentality, making VN culture develop independently.” The second was to give Vietnamese culture a “mass orientation,” which meant creating culture that served the “majority of the population.” The third was to make culture “scientific” in character, which meant creating culture that neither included nor reflected any “antiscientific” or “antiprogressive” ideas. Echoing Mao’s prescriptions, Chinh advocated a new type of culture that was “not yet socialist or Soviet.” It would be “national in form but new democratic in content.”³¹

Though borrowed from Mao’s “On New Democracy,” Chinh’s 1943 formulations on culture also followed the pattern of the Vietminh front and the later DRV government. All were derived loosely from Lenin’s two-stage revolutionary strategy. Knowing that communism was not a well-understood or popular ideology in Vietnam, the party would begin by concealing their political control behind nationalist and “bourgeois democratic” institutions such as elections, a National Assembly, a legal system, and so forth. Neutral-sounding code words would be substituted for terms closely associated with communism. Thus, the vague term “majority” would replace “proletariat” or “workers and peasants.” Similarly, “scientific” or “new democratic” would replace “communist” or “Marxist-Leninist.”

By packaging communist content in familiar national and bourgeois democratic forms, the party would help noncommunist Vietnamese move beyond their prejudices and give that disguised communist content a fair chance. Soviet ideals, institutions, and culture excited Vietnam’s party leaders. At least initially, they probably believed that the intrinsic value of Soviet models would be appreciated by regular people if only the stigma of communism could be overcome. As people recognized the superior quality of the party’s “new culture,” the party leaders would gradually reveal that it was “communist” culture and “Marxist-Leninist” content.

In the first issue of the DRV’s original cultural newspaper, *Vanguard*, the party leaders published Chinh’s *Outline on Vietnamese Culture*. Thus, the dozens of cultural luminaries recruited to the Vietminh front during the early days of the revolution must have known of the party’s intention to control cultural production. Over the course of the war, DRV intellectuals learned what party

control meant and occasionally pushed back against it. However, the extraordinary conditions of war, the nationalist nature of the DRV's fight against French recolonization, and the bonds of friendship between DRV intellectuals in the maquis seem to have convinced most of them to accept their loss of creative control. When the war ended in the summer of 1954, though, many of these intellectuals, while loyal to the DRV, believed that they had earned the right to produce literature, art, music, theatre, etc., on their own again. As we will see, for a few months in 1956, a number of them would attempt to do so.

Land Reform Literature

The party leaders shaped the content and style of land reform literature in four ways. First, they introduced DRV intellectuals to the PRC's most famous work of land reform fiction, *The Hurricane* (Mùa to gió lớn), and its most famous antilandlord film, *The White-Haired Girl* (Bạch màu nữ).³² Second, DRV intellectuals were put through "thought reform" to cleanse their minds of "petit-bourgeois thinking" and to inculcate in them the theoretical justification for the land reform campaign. Third, the party leaders recruited most DRV intellectuals to serve as mass mobilization cadres or at least to observe a land reform struggle session. And fourth, the party leaders trained cultural officials to intervene directly in the creative process, identifying politically problematic aspects of literature and making the author rewrite them to better accord with the party's policy goals.

The literature produced to serve the mass mobilization campaign arguably marked the nadir of DRV cultural production. To justify the killing of thousands of "landlords," the regime's writers had to demonize rural elites to the point of absurd caricature, turning the exception into a general rule. To create that "deformed vision" of rural society, as Georges Boudarel described it, DRV writers had to remove from their narrative virtually all the complexity and nuance of human life, leaving their plots with one-dimensional characters. Poor peasants were entirely good and always had been; landlords were entirely evil and always had been. In addition to being unrealistic, the land reform literature promoted values that contradicted Vietnamese traditions and seemed unlikely to form the basis of a healthy new culture. Hatred was a noble sentiment. Denunciation of a neighbor for being a "spy" or "landlord" was honorable. Revenge was progressive, cathartic, and glorious. Forgiveness and pity were either foolish or grounds for suspicion.

A theme of land reform literature, like that of the mass mobilization itself, was the exoneration of the DRV government, the Communist Party, and Hồ

Chí Minh from the difficulties of rural life since the 1945 August Revolution. Thus, a stock scene of the land reform literature showed poor-peasant characters awakening to the reality that all difficulties stemmed, in one way or another, from landlord perfidy. As a poor peasant in a short story by Nguyễn Công Hoan proclaims, “I know that the Revolution makes poor people not be poor anymore, but because they [the landlords] wormed their way into the regime, we have not enjoyed any benefit of independence.”³³

Another theme of land reform fiction was poor-peasant gratitude toward the party and Chairman Hồ. Through the process of banding together, denouncing landlords, taking their belongings, and assuming leadership positions in local political organizations, poor peasants gained dignity and wholeness as people. A poor peasant from the writer Kim Lân’s short story, “Becoming Wife and Husband,” declares at a meeting with other poor peasants: “Truly, the more I think, the more I thank Mr. Hồ. Without the land reform, when would it be like this, when would Mr. Thế be able to marry, when would all his neighbors help him like this?” Other peasants at the meeting chime in with affirmations about the happiness of their lives since the elimination of local landlords.

Later in the story, the poor peasant Thế asks the land reform cadre, Vân, whether he (Thế) should now marry his local poor-peasant sweetheart. “I only worry that I am so busy with work—maybe I should wait until independence.” To this, the cadre Vân replies: “There is still much work to be done, but we still get married. Do you think there won’t still be lots of work after independence? Of course, we will have to build the country so we can have tractors and harvesters like in the Soviet Union and China.”³⁴

Since they wrote under the guidance of the party leaders, DRV writers produced land-reform fiction that often reflected the Politburo’s unstated concern about finding sufficient numbers of struggle targets. One fear was that the campaign would lose struggle targets through suicide. In the short story “Dredging up Misery” (*Gõi khổ*), the narrator, who takes the perspective of a tough land reform cadre, describes the scene in a village shortly after the arrival of the land reform team. A fifty-year-old villager named Tuyên has already been identified as a “cruel and despotic landlord” and his younger sister, Chính, as a Nationalist Party spy. The following passage from the story indicates that an important task of the land reform cadre was to prevent the loss of struggle targets through flight or suicide:

The land reform team enters the commune. The guerrilla public security agents begin to monitor the landlords. [The landlord] Tuyên has many

unusual actions: what is he planning to do? Flee? Somehow get the peasants off his track? Or, having studied, is he intending to commit suicide as the village chief of Trung Nghĩa did? If he wants to die, he has to settle his exploitative debts with the peasants first.³⁵

How could areas that had been under DRV control for the past seven or eight years have large numbers of Nationalist Party members, spies, and cruel despotic landlords? The following passage from Nguyễn Công Hoan's *Peasants and Landlords* explains how land reform cadres were to make this implausible narrative a reality in a local community that seemed devoid of struggle targets:

The mass mobilization for rent reduction team entered a subdistrict during wave 1 and based itself on the local party leaders, asking them to introduce good poor peasants. But the team only met people who were impure [*không trong sạch*]. Therefore, for the past half month, the [cadres] have not been able to discover the cruel crimes of the landlord Giảng. They also have not been able to find a single ringleader landlord [*địa chủ đầu sỏ*].

Because [landlord] Giảng carefully installed his henchmen in order to surround the [rent reduction] team, the team stumbled on a nest of ants. But the Team leader was alert and smart. After researching the history of the local party cell, he insisted that the Team take the long road, getting rid of their old roots [poor peasant recruits] and finding new ones by themselves and, at the same time, calling comrade Ngân to the community.

When comrade Ngân came, he demanded that the Team immediately repress Giảng. After that, the people became enthusiastic and denounced all his crimes.

Those cruel, despotic, and reactionary landlords who adopted the appearance of party members, who exploited the name of the Party in order to smear the Party, were punished appropriately.

Those poor peasants who had a clean history, who were loved by the people, who resolutely struggled, who were supported [by cadres] during the movement, were recruited into the Party.

The day the special people's court announced its verdict on Giảng, several thousand people clapped and cheered together for ten minutes. After that, one and all shouted:

Independent and unified Vietnam forever!

Chairman Hồ forever!

The Vietnamese Workers Party forever!³⁶

Hunger, 1953

By 1953, as Nguyễn Tất Thành (Hồ Chí Minh) and his lieutenants in the Politburo were moving forward with land reform, the food situation in many DRV-controlled areas was either on the brink of, or heading steadily toward, disaster. The lack of food stemmed partly from the economic dislocations of war, partly from the French bombing of dikes, partly from the enormous amount of rice required to feed the growing DRV state and military, and partly from the party's counterproductive policies. Generally, when governments want less of something in society, they tax that thing more. For the DRV leaders, they needed to tax agriculture more and also have more of it.

From the perspective of the Politburo, one challenge of the land reform was that the extraordinary conditions of war undermined two of the campaign's most important ideological justifications. The first was that the "feudal landlord class" bore the greatest responsibility for the current difficulties of peasants in DRV-controlled areas. Whatever challenges rural elites had posed to the rural poor in the past, evidence suggests that these had been surpassed by those generated by the DRV state and the realities of war. A second land-reform justification held that the rural poor were driven by land hunger. Had the tax demands of the DRV state been less onerous, most peasants, driven by hunger itself and by the prestige that came with land ownership, would have been eager to acquire more land and to produce more food. However, peasants understood that "temporary land distributions" were not the same as land ownership. Recipients of such land could not sell it to earn money. The land continued to belong to the DRV state, which, being responsible for prosecuting a war, had a hunger for rice and labor greater than that of most local elites.

Moreover, the DRV's agricultural tax was calculated as a percentage of estimated yields determined by the state rather than as a percentage of actual yields determined by the farmer's abilities and other objective factors such as

weather, soil quality, availability of cheap labor, and so on. In other words, the agricultural tax was an early form of command economy. Understanding that this system was rigged against them, many peasants were reluctant to take on more land for fear of being driven into debt to the government. This was an important factor contributing to the large areas of uncultivated farmland in DRV-controlled regions.

The Party Leaders Address the Spread of Famine

In their explanations for the food crisis, the DRV leaders were desperate to link rural hardships to the enemy—the French, the anticommunist State of Vietnam, or, increasingly, the landlord class—rather than to the exactions imposed upon peasants by the DRV state. So strong was the desire of the party leaders to deflect blame away from the government that they created a propaganda campaign linking the food shortage to locust plagues. There may have been some truth to a locust problem—however, there was no truth to the fantastical claim that the plague had been organized by the French. At a January 1953 meeting of the party Central Committee, Trường Chinh claimed that “Recently, based on zone reports, the enemy has used the incredibly wicked scheme of destroying the harvest through the release of insects.”¹ Later in his report, Chinh instructed Central Committee members that they “must be alert to and take precautions against the enemy’s release of insects to destroy the harvest.”² That Chinh would make such an absurd claim to Central Committee members suggests that a significant distance existed between the Politburo and second-tier party leaders.

Famine Report of the Central Committee’s Peasant Mobilization Subcommittee (March, 1953)

The Central Committee’s Peasant Mobilization Subcommittee (the bureaucratic organ that would be turned into the “Central Land Reform Committee” a few months later) produced an important famine report in March of 1953. Although most internal government documents were directed toward offices or ministries, the Peasant Mobilization Subcommittee’s report on famine was simply addressed to “Uncle [Thành or Hồ Chí Minh], the Central Committee Office, Mr. Thận [Trường Chinh], Mr. Tô [Phạm Văn Đồng], Mr. Việt [Hoàng Quốc Việt], Mr. Lương [Lê Văn Lương], Mr. Lành [Tố Hữu], and Mr. Thắng [Hồ Việt Thắng].

The Subcommittee’s report began with a brief survey of the various interzones in Vietnam, noting provinces and regions where the food situation had become critical. For example, in Hà Đông, just south of Hanoi, ten subdistricts

were “short on rice, with only rich peasants and landlords having spare rice to eat; the majority of those who are hungry are forced to survive on crayfish and snails.” Written in the margin next to this section was the comment, “The people are hungry; landlords and rich peasants have extra rice to eat.”

As for the causes of the famine, the Subcommittee stressed a “lack of vigor in implementing the party’s land policies,” “terrible exploitation” by local elites, efforts by the French to “sabotage the harvest,” and “natural disasters, floods, drought, and insects.” These challenges had “reduced productivity in some places by three quarters.” There was no mention of the agricultural tax in this March 1953 document as a factor leading to famine. But the Subcommittee did conclude its assessment with the following statement: “In our opinion, it is very easy for cadres, comrades, and people to have false perceptions, to fall victim to the enemy’s counterpropaganda stating that the famine is primarily a result of the agricultural tax.”

*Phạm Văn Đồng’s “Directive on Famine
Prevention and Relief” (May 12, 1953).*

In May of 1953, a month after the Peasant Mobilization Subcommittee’s famine report, the DRV prime minister, Phạm Văn Đồng, released a six-page directive devoted solely to the issue of famine. It began with an assessment of the scope of the problem: “Over the past two years, in a number of localities, famine has taken on a regular character, and there are places where it has become serious.” Đồng divided the causes of the famine into two categories, “objective” and “subjective.” The former referred to difficulties created by nature and “feudal exploitation.” The latter referred to factors related to the efforts of local DRV leaders.

The regime of feudal exploitation of the peasants in the countryside has played a not insignificant role in creating famine. In recent years, during the months of March and August, a number of landlords and rich peasants have refused to give loans to peasants or have waited until the local poor were especially needy so that loans could be given at a higher interest rate. There are even those who exploit the people’s difficulties in order to engage in speculation and hoarding. In many locations, although there is famine, there is no lack of rice in the market and the price even declines. This phenomenon proves that the rich and the speculators still have extra rice at the time when people are dying from starvation.³

Though feudal exploitation, enemy attacks, sabotage, and climatic challenges played a “definite role” in the spread of famine, stated Đồng, “we do not throw our hands up in the air in the face of those causes.”

With better attention to the famine's subjective causes, in other words, those stemming from the shortcomings of local leaders, the objective ones could be overcome. "Experience has shown that, under the correct leadership of the party and the government, in many places, the people have been victorious in the struggle against the enemy and the elements, protecting production." As for feudal exploitation, Đông pointed out that local cadres also had in their corner the party's land policies, the "people's government," and the "forces of the masses." This was "enough strength," he stressed, to fight against the "illegal exploitation practiced by the landlords." As Đông explained:

But the truth is that in many places we have not resisted zealously the enemy's efforts at sabotage; we have not struggled against the elements or against feudalist exploitation. In the same manner, we have not zealously organized the masses to help each other increase production and economize.

Then, when the famine happens, [local cadres] do not try to fight the famine, to curb it, to prevent it from spreading, to prevent it from becoming critical. Many of our cadres lack a class political standpoint, a mass perspective. They do not care about the lives of the people and do not dare implement the needed and appropriate measures to address the famine.

Thus, the objective causes behind the famine are still a factor, but the *subjective causes* allowed the famine to develop and are more serious.

Rather than blame objective difficulties, [local cadres] should carry out serious self-criticism with respect to their above shortcomings, correctly recognizing what is needed for famine prevention and relief work. [This should lead to] a zealous correction and reform of one's work.⁴

Đông exhorted local cadres to do more to increase production, to "correctly implement the Government's production and economization plan," and to focus on producing grains such as rice, potatoes, corn, and manioc. Local cadres were to lead members of their community to "produce enough to eat and enough to store." This meant "thoroughly implementing the Government's directives on anti-flood and anti-drought measures," as well as fighting the enemy's efforts at sabotage such as the destruction of crops, agricultural tools, and irrigation networks.

The third section of the prime minister's May 12 famine directive provided specifics about short-term tasks. Đông stressed that, if possible, local cadres should solve the problem by using local resources rather than by compelling the government to give up rice collected from the agricultural tax, which was

desperately needed for the army. Thus, famine-relief solution number one involved organizing attacks on local elites who still had rice:

The general method is as follows: *resolutely take those places that still have food, those people who still have food, to save those places that are hungry, those people who are hungry.* In more concrete terms, this means the following:

1. Mobilize and organize the masses to *borrow the rice of landlords and rich peasants. The principle for borrowing rice is persuasion accompanied by force.* At the same time, stop the payment of land rents and loan debts (both the original amount of the loan and the interest) to landlords and rich peasants. The local administration must use its forces to help the hungry masses in this work.
2. Lend rice [to those who need it] from local rice-relief stores.
3. Request that the Government distribute some rice from its store to:
 - a. Distribute to those who are suffering from famine (first aid)
 - b. Lend to poor hungry peasants
 - c. Use as payment for hungry people who can be used for work such as transport, road repair, irrigation, etc.
 - d. The Ministry of National Commerce can coordinate the transport of rice to be sold to the people while at the same time collecting forestry products from the people.⁵

The party leaders, as was frequently the case, wanted local cadres to hold meetings to discuss the prescriptions put forward in the directive and to devise plans for implementation. But perhaps most of all (and this section was written in italics), local cadres needed to turn anti-famine work into a “*mass movement*”—in other words, “mobilizing, organizing, and leading the masses, bringing democracy and the positive force of the masses into play.”⁶

A month and a half later, though, on July 30, 1953, Đông released a directive titled “On Economic, Production, and Rationing Work.” He reiterated that weaknesses in local leadership were the “main overall reason for the situation of scarcity and hunger in the countryside.” These weaknesses included “shortcomings in tax collection (especially the agricultural tax), the mobilization of people’s laborers, corruption, waste, and bureaucratism.”⁷

With respect to the agricultural tax, the Politburo decided to raise the minimum production level at which the agricultural tax would begin to be collected. Thus, anyone producing under 81 kilograms of rice (instead of the old rate of 71 kilograms) was allegedly exempt from the tax. The party leaders also called

for a 5 percent reduction in the rate of “supplemental tax” to be paid to the local administration for their use. More importantly, though, *Đông* stated that the government would not collect any more than 20 percent of a peasant’s harvest. These moves were made to “ensure supply for the resistance war while lightening the contribution provided by the small producers and the laboring poor.”⁸ But the idea that the state, even with large contributions of food aid from China, could feed an army and a growing bureaucracy with a 20 percent agricultural tax rate was not realistic. And, soon enough, the party leaders would again look for ways to increase the amount of rice that peasants would hand over to the state.

Some Views of Famine from Interzone and Provincial Level Cadres

1. Famine in Interzone 3

Interzone 3 was composed of provinces that lay to the west and south of Hanoi, including Nam Định and Ninh Bình, which had some of the largest Catholic communities in the country.⁹ A thick archival file on hunger in 1953 contains many different reports on the situation in Interzone 3, one coming from the interzone leadership and others coming from provincial-level economic committees. Some of the reports have comments or instructions written in the margins. These were likely the comments of a high-ranking party official, possibly *Phạm Văn Đông* himself. According to the report:

Famine occurred in every locality in the interzone, but because cadres at all levels care little for the livelihood of the masses, their descriptions of the situation sent to the interzone leaders are badly lacking, slow, or incorrect. Only when a group of interzone-level cadres went to the countryside to inspect the situation did it become apparent that in many places [the hunger situation] had become critical. And the cadres in communes and in hamlets were not themselves clear about the situation.

The earliest archival report on the hunger situation in Interzone 3 was written in February 1953, by which time the party leaders had already begun their campaign to blame the food crisis and other problems on feudal exploitation. After that propaganda campaign had picked up momentum (around March and April), and especially after *Đông*’s May directive on famine, virtually all reports would be careful to follow his explanation: enemy, weather, and feudal exploitation. The reasons for the famine put forward in the February report

from Interzone 3 were close to those that Đông would advance in May. The key difference was that the Interzone 3 report mentioned the DRV state instead of feudal exploitation:

Reasons for the Famine

- Natural disasters, weather not good for the 1952 May harvest, which ended up being only 2/3 the level of the previous year. The October harvest was also badly damaged. In addition to that, crops were hurt by insects and mice.
- The enemy carried out many sweeps, wrecking things over the past years. Now, the people are exhausted.
- Poor peasants have not harvested enough rice to pay the agricultural tax for the October harvest. Having sold all their rice, paying the agricultural tax means they have no more food.

Concerns about the government's agricultural tax were also listed in two other sections of the report titled "The people's thinking," and "What the people wish."

The Government has not collected the agricultural tax since last May but is now collecting it. The people did not prepare to pay the tax by setting aside rice earlier. When they paid the tax, they were out of food. Indeed, for some households, after paying the tax, everybody began to cry. There are some people who complain that the [estimated] yield level [on which the tax percentage was based] was too high (Bình Minh subdistrict). The people are concerned; cadres in the subdistrict have not calculated [the tax] clearly with the people, have not allowed the people to participate in the discussion when their estimated yields were determined, contributing to the yields having been set high.

The section titled "What the people desire" reported that the people "want the Government to pay back its debts to them (the rice borrowed by the province, district, or subdistrict)—the people would like to be able to subtract that debt from the agricultural tax." The people wanted to "definitively settle the amount of rice tax that they have paid so as to achieve some peace of mind." Again, the report makes no mention of feudal exploitation as a major cause of the famine.

This was also the case in an April 10 report on hunger from the Economic Committee of Interzone 3, a fact that seems to have inspired the ire of Phạm Văn Đông. A section of that report described the situation in Nam Định province:

Among the people who lack food, the majority are landless, poor, and lower-middle peasants. The reason is that, aside from rice farming, they have no other source of work. In Y Yên, even the landlord and rich peasant families [are short on food]. Landlords in Bình Điện (Bao Dai subdistrict have had to sell their beds and bureaus in order to eat mixed rice mash, or they eat a meal of rice followed by a meal of corn. In Vụ Bản, many cadres in the subdistrict are also struggling with hunger, eating a full meal and then a hungry meal, with their families left needy. This has also had an impact on cadres' work. A number have turned to trading or they have taken their families [south] to Interzone 4 in order to find work. There are cadres who, because of hunger, spend the morning hunting for crayfish and snails. In the afternoon they return and carry out their political work. Those cadres who themselves have not yet been able to pay all their taxes do not dare urge the people to pay theirs.

The high-ranking party leader who read the report underlined the third and fourth sentences in the above extract describing the difficulties of landlord and rich peasant families. In the margin he wrote, "You were fooled!"

As we saw, Phạm Văn Đồng had released his directive on the famine in May; the impact appears immediately in the report on famine in Interzone 3 written on June 16, 1953. Clearly taking its cue from Đồng's directive, the report writer was quick to replicate in the document's "causes" section those that had been put forward by the prime minister in the May directive: (1) the enemy, (2) weather, and (3) feudal exploitation. Those were the "objective reasons" for the famine.

As for the "subjective" reasons, all dealt with the shortcomings of the interzone administration from top to bottom. The report did have an interesting section devoted to "secondary reasons for the famine." Of these six secondary reasons, the first was the handling of the agricultural tax, but, in accordance with the new anti-landlord wind coming from the party leadership, the report writer explained the agricultural tax in a way that cohered with the official narrative of landlord and local-cadre collusion:

As was the case in Hòa Bình and Ninh Bình provinces, the implementation of the agricultural tax policy has also contributed to the peasants' lack of rice. There are places where the peasants have eaten through all their rice, and [local cadres] have made a point of collecting rice from them first in order to give landlords and peasants time to disperse all their rice. Then when the cadres set out to collect the rice [for the agricultural tax], they cannot collect enough anymore. There are a few places where local cadres,

when collecting taxes, have overstated the tax level for poor and middle peasants and not, in a timely fashion, recalculated and returned to the peasants the rice due to them. In Gia Viên district, there are subdistricts where [local cadres] have used rice collected from poor and middle peasants in order to compensate for shortfalls in the amount of rice collected from landlords and rich peasants (to ensure that the subdistrict as whole has met its agricultural tax target). There are places (such as Lương Sơn) where local cadres have, in a self-serving manner, falsely reported the land of landlords and rich peasants while calculating poor and middle peasants' land so that they must pay more in taxes. This enables cadres to reduce the amount of taxes that landlords and rich peasants must pay. Local cadres have collected the tax too slowly (the month of March), contributing to the inability of our countrymen to prepare the amount of rice needed to pay the tax. After they have paid the tax, they are short on food. There are places where yields have suffered shortfalls of over 20%, yet [local cadres] did not reduce tax burdens in a timely fashion, contributing to our compatriots' lack of food.

The recruitment of large numbers of peasants for "people's porters" (*dân công*) also contributed to the production declines. As he had with the agricultural tax, the writer of the June 16 report described the policy of mandatory service as "people's porters" in a way that attributed all negative effects to the manner in which the policy had been implemented by supposedly corrupt local cadres, rather than from the inevitable consequences of the policy itself. "The mobilization of people's porters has also, in many instances, harmed production. In Hòa Bình province, there was a subdistrict that made people serve as people's porters for 17 or 18 days in a month." The report criticized government offices for allegedly recruiting people's porters "when it was convenient and not thinking about the impact on the livelihood of the people."

In his May 1953 directive, Phạm Văn Đồng had called upon party members to resolve food shortages, as much as possible, through mobilization of the masses to pressure local elites into lending their extra rice. Soon after, descriptions of these "forced lendings" became a common feature of famine reports. It appears that the "forced lendings" were organized by the interzone-level party leaders and carried out by special "interzone-level cadres" sent into chosen localities. In his assessment of how this approach fared, the report writer from Interzone 3 followed the typical format of "strengths and weaknesses." He began by stating that these interzone cadres had "helped many localities, and, in many places, had mobilized peasants to participate enthusiastically in the forced lendings." But the report writer appears to damn with faint praise these special cadres,

writing that they had “grasped the guidelines” of the policy only “relatively well” (*tương đối*).

As he turned to their “weaknesses,” the report writer listed eight issues related to these “forced lendings.” One of the eight criticisms took cadres to task for “lacking a firm class political standpoint,” for being too accommodating to landlords, for “pitying” them and advising peasants to lower their demands on landlords targeted for “forced lending.” The other seven criticisms, however, painted just the opposite picture. For example, the report writer expressed frustration with some cadres for how they chose “forced lending” targets:

Cadres do not grasp the fact that the target is the stubborn landlords and rich peasants. This means that there is no discrimination among the ranks of the landlords—between those who are stubborn and those who are relatively okay—so as to sow divisions among them. Cadres do not distinguish between a rich peasant and a middle peasant. They do not recognize that every class requires a different approach. As a result, in some places even middle peasants have become targets of struggle. Cadres operate under the slogan of “struggle” against anybody who has rice and money, forcing them to lend it. Or, cadres mechanically hold the view that all landlords are “stubborn;” the result is that “struggle” is preferred over persuasion. Cadres’ notion of what qualifies as “stubborn” behavior is too harsh. There are places where a rich peasant, having only begun uttering a few apologetic and conciliatory sentences, is immediately branded as stubborn. There are places where merchants have become the target of struggle.

Another theme of the criticisms was the way in which the “forced lendings” were carried out.

Cadres have been too inclined toward using orders instead of patient persuasion. Their impatience, their desire to attain immediate results, has led to leftist and anarchic actions. There are places (such as Kim Bang, Y Yèn, Gia Viên, [. . .]) where, after gathering the peasants, they all flock to the landlord’s house and immediately start searching. In a rage, they start carrying off rice and taking furniture. There is no explanation or attempt at persuasion afforded the landlord at all. There are places where they beat the landlord. There are places where they abuse landlords by making them kneel and then striking them; [other times] they make them wear a basket on their heads when pushing them forward to be “struggled” against. In Ninh Thảng, a landlord’s daughter was seized and tied up in a buffalo pen.

The report writer complained that cadres, when leading the peasants in these “forced lendings,” did nothing to curb their “ardor” and did not intervene when things went beyond policy guidelines. “There are some circumstances in which [cadres] hold that, because the landlords and rich peasants have exploited the peasants so much, it is okay if the peasants commit a few leftist excesses.” As a result, “cadres tacitly agree to allow the masses to beat landlords, believing that only through torture will the landlords cough up their belongings for the peasants to borrow.” When the crowd of peasants arrived at the landlord’s house, “if he acted as though he had nothing, the cadre would just let the peasants into the house to take anything, including everyday things like trays, bowls, forks, and even fish sauce.”

After putting forward these criticisms, the report writer moved to the issue of how different classes viewed the “forced lendings.” With respect to the village poor, “Generally speaking, they enthusiastically participate in the “forced lending,” and, after successfully carrying it out, they believe in their strength and praise the Party and Government.” However, the report writer expressed concern about the precedent that these “forced lendings” would set in the countryside. “A few poor peasants are starting to have the mentality of relying upon the Party and the Government.” One poor peasant was apparently recorded as saying: “From now on, I am not going to be afraid of hunger anymore. If I am hungry, I will just ‘struggle.’”

With respect to the reaction of “middle peasants” to the “forced lending,” the report noted that the lower-middle peasants “zealously” participated in them, showing solidarity with the poor peasants, but were not quite as enthusiastic. As for the “upper-middle peasants”:

A number of upper-middle peasants were worried initially that they had enough to food or even extra food and could therefore become a “struggle” target. Some were afraid to admit that they were middle peasants. But after they understood the policy of the Government, realized that they were not the targets of the “forced lending” sessions, they became less anxious. A number also participated in the “struggles” but seemed a bit half-hearted. A number made allegations in support of the landlords and rich peasants, asserting that “forced lending” was actually the brutalization of landlords and rich peasants.

A number [of upper-middle peasants] who had relations with landlords and rich peasants secretly entered their houses in order to warn them to hide their belongings. When the “forced lending” session became

enthusiastic, the middle peasant would gradually lean toward the side of the poor peasants. But when [some middle peasants] saw a landlord surrender, they would often try to reduce the hatred of the landless and poor peasants, or they would be eager to compromise when the landlord had conceded close to the amount demanded, frequently showing pity for the landlord.

The “rich peasants,” it was reported, were “very worried” by the “forced lending” sessions and attempted to hide their belongings and rice. A few had apparently conspired with landlords to find a way of dealing with the poor peasants’ “forced lending” campaigns. Nevertheless, the report explained, often after a landlord had surrendered before a “forced lending” confrontation, a number of rich peasants would then seek out poor peasants in order to lend them rice and to try to “win their hearts.” A number of rich peasants tried to find a way of becoming a member of the Peasant Association. Others, because they were afraid of becoming targets of “struggle,” asked if there was any way to become a middle peasant. However, other rich peasants were apparently less conciliatory:

On the other hand, a number of rich peasants (the majority being bullies) showed themselves to be stubborn. When forced to lend they complained bitterly and spread negative ideas about the landless, poor, and middle peasants. For example, “they don’t want to work but they still want to eat” or “what’s the point in trying to become wealthy—whatever one is able to save and put aside is just taken away.”

As for the landlords themselves, they appear much like the rich peasants in the report, with some choosing a conciliatory approach and others “stubbornly” resisting. Whichever approach was taken, though, it was all typical landlord treachery. Thus, some landlords apparently met with each other to devise a group strategy for handling the “forced lending” challenge. Others tried to gain sympathy from the poor peasants through “sweet talk” or by “pretending” that they, the landlords, were also suffering from hunger. The writer of the report described one landlord in Hòa Bình province who, after learning that the peasants were going to demand a loan from him, started to “go into the forest digging for wild yams” as though out of food. According to the report, some landlords threatened the peasants, saying that they, the landlords, would get revenge when the “enemy” returned.

In this report, the comments alleged to have been made by members of local communities seem mostly plausible, though one wonders about some quotes that match too well with the regime's propaganda. A Nam Định province report produced in July of 1953, for example, quoted poor peasants as saying, "If we had not had the Government and Chairman Hồ during this period, we would have starved to death." Another peasant is alleged to have stated: "With the Party, the Government, and Chairman Hồ, we are definitely not afraid of starving to death."

2. *Famine in Interzone 4*

Interzone 4 was composed of the two large and populous provinces of Thanh Hóa and Nghệ An along with the two more modest-sized provinces of Hà Tĩnh, and Quảng Bình. Together, these four provinces form what appears roughly as a long neck on which rests the Red River delta to the north. Since the beginning of the war, the French command had left most of this interzone to the DRV. Though seeing little fighting, Interzone 4 no doubt suffered economically from the general disruptions caused by the war, especially disruptions to the flow of goods in and out of the region.

The reports on the famine situation in Interzone 4 were all written in April 1953, before Phạm Văn Đồng's May directive. As an April 4 report on Thanh Hóa province stated, "Here and there, in all districts of the province, there are a number of families who have slid into a situation of hunger. The hunger problem is concentrated in villages and subdistricts of the following districts: Nông Cống, Tĩnh Gia, Quảng Xương, Hậu Lộc, Hoàng Hoa, Nga Sơn." Below is the report's description of the situation in the districts of Nông Cống and Tĩnh Gia:

Nông Cống: From Tân Phúc [in the northern part of the district] down through Hoàng Sơn, Tế Nông, Minh Khôi, Vạn Thiện, Thăng Bình, and Công Liêm, the people are living poorly. This is not to mention those families that are truly struggling and lack food.

Công Liêm subdistrict has 8 families suffering from hunger.

Tân Phúc has two families that have begun to beg.

The village of Yên Dân in Trung Chính subdistrict has 24 families that are truly suffering from hunger.

Thăng Bình subdistrict is the worst:

65 families have to go without eating for 3 or 4 days. Their health has already started to deteriorate (bodies are thin and their skin, pale).

For 341 families, life has become precarious. When the weather is clear they are able to eat, but they have to eat mush and in a reduced quantity. If it rains for 3 or 4 days, they do not eat.

Tĩnh Gia:

Cát Sơn sub-district: 300 families are suffering from hunger, eating a meal of rice followed by a meal of gruel.

Tượng Lĩnh: 300 families [suffering from hunger]

Tượng Văn: 460 families (the majority living next to the mountain)

Xuân Lâm: 30 families in the village of Thanh Thủy (a Catholic village)

Hải Lĩnh: 220 families

Every day, 20 to 30 people climb up to mountain fields in order to dig for yams to bring home and eat. On the days when it rains, they don't eat.

With respect to the causes of the famine, not one of the reports from the four different provinces of Interzone 4 referred to feudal exploitation as a significant factor. For example, the section devoted to Thanh Hóa described the situation as follows:

Thanh Hóa—reasons for famine:

Objective reasons:

1. Destroyed by the enemy air attacks Gia Hà, Thạch Tân (?), Yên Dân.
2. Enemy sweeps: Đ. . . (unreadable), Giáp Ngoại, Liên Sơn.
3. Enemy blockade by sea, hampering of local fishing (the coastal sub-districts).
4. Lost harvest last year because of western wind, high salination water flooding (Tĩnh Gia, Nông Cống).

Subjective reasons:

1. The main reason is the lack of leadership [by local cadres] in the field of agricultural production, especially in those regions that lost their irrigation canals. Aside from that, there are other reasons.
2. [Peasants] have contributed only a little in advanced tax payments. Then they eat through most of their rice and money. When the October harvest comes, they must pay everything [at one time]. Or, if the October harvest agricultural tax is carried out slowly, they overspend on farming.
3. Deviations in the mobilization of people's porters. Mobilization of people who are primarily laborers without zealously helping their households with production.

4. A number of landless and poor peasants (Hậu Lộc) have invested everything into ensuring production on more land than they have had in previous years (because they have [received extra land] through redemptions or through temporary distribution) and have not received any help.

Another problem pointed out in the Thanh Hóa province report was that a “great many” of the hungry subdistricts were occupied by people whose livelihood depended solely on rice farming. They survived by gathering and selling firewood from the nearby forest, but the price of firewood had “dropped considerably,” meaning that an enormous amount of wood needed to be collected to earn enough money for the purchase of food.

The Problem of Hunger Viewed from Below

Three “Hungry” Subdistricts in Interzone 4’s Nghệ An Province

On May 13, 1953, a member of Nghệ An province’s Resistance Committee sent a report on the famine to his immediate superiors in the secretariat of the Interzone 4 Resistance Committee. In his message, this local cadre explained that the attached report dealt with the three struggling subdistricts of Văn Hiến, Hoa Lưu, and Nhân Mỹ. To research the situation there, the Nghệ An province Resistance Committee had sent one of its members, Mr. Nguyễn Đức Thi, along with Mr. Hoàng Trần Trực, the vice-chairman of the Anh Sơn district Resistance Committee, directly to Văn Hiến and Hoa Lưu to investigate.

At the same time, an attaché of the Anh Sơn district Party Committee had been sent to investigate the food situation in Nhân Mỹ, the third of the hungry subdistricts. After investigating the situation, Mr. Thi held a meeting with the subdistrict’s Resistance Committee and mass organizations (attended by cadres from each village). The meeting’s purpose was to reach a consensus on the hunger situation’s causes and solutions. That meeting, apparently in Hoa Lưu, was also attended by the attaché recruited to inspect the situation in Nhân Mỹ.

The report provided brief, shorthand descriptions of the situation in five villages of Văn Hiến subdistrict and two in Hoa Lưu subdistrict. All of these were considered “typical” of the situation throughout that subdistrict. Not a single family in any of these three subdistricts had qualified as a “landlord” according to the criteria used to carry out the census in 1950 and 1951. In the village of Văn Thái, it was reported that 130 families lacked food and that the village had two rich-peasant families—less than 2 percent of the total population. The village of

Văn Đông had 179 total families, five of which were labeled as rich peasants—less than 3 percent. The village of Văn Thờ had 140 total families, two of which qualified as rich peasants—less than 2 percent.

In all the descriptions of these seven Nghệ An villages, only two negative comments about rich peasants appear. Two rich peasant families in the village of Văn Thái were reported a month earlier to have each had 400 to 500 kilograms of rice. One of them had apparently sold on credit some corn to people in need and had the “trick” of lending people plates that could be sold for money or food. Though certainly negative, there is nothing particularly “feudal” in this description of the village’s two rich peasants. Nor does the report link them in any direct way to the causes of the famine.

The second negative comment about a rich peasant appears in the description of one of the villages in Hoa Lưu: “The situation with rich peasants: there are six families (1 rich peasant specializes in exploiting high interest loans and supplemental rents for buffalos and cows).” This was the only mention of “feudal” exploitation in the entire report. Moreover, in none of the summaries of the reasons for the famine and in none of the reports on the people’s ideas about the causes behind the famine does feudal exploitation or any action of rich peasants appear.

The relationship that appears to be of greater concern to starving local peasants was the one between themselves and the DRV state, especially with respect to the agricultural tax. The cadre who wrote the report clearly did not dare state too strongly that the tax was a fundamental cause of the hunger in these three subdistricts, but he had subtle ways of making this an unavoidable conclusion. For example, he commented that many of the people who were suffering from hunger had paid their agricultural tax.

The report on the village of Văn Thái in Văn Hiến subdistricts notes that 40 of the roughly 139 families in the community still owed some amount of agricultural tax, with a few middle peasants short 400 to 500 kilograms of rice. In the section “opinion among the people,” the report states that people had not been able to gather the amount of rice required by the government in time and thus had felt compelled to sell furniture and water buffalos in order to meet the requirement.

The report from the village of Văn Đông states that only 22 of the 179 families in the community had been able to pay their agricultural tax—and all families who were hungry were also short on their agricultural tax. “Of the 165 families short on food, only three had been able to pay their agricultural tax. The entire village still owes 40,000 kilograms [400 tạ] of rice.”

This description coheres with the picture of the agricultural tax as a government rice requisition that used estimated yield percentages as a means of punishing peasants for underproduction. With respect to the general opinion among the people, the report stated: “because [people] are short on their tax payment, they do not speak up about their hunger.” Another opinion was that “this year we can’t produce enough—we are dead whether we eat or not.”

As for the village of Hoa Trung, the report stated that, of the 188 total families in the village, “only 66 families had handed in their agricultural tax and, of the 96 families lacking food, the majority had paid their agricultural tax.” The report claimed that, “of the [village’s] six rich peasant families, three are still short in paying their agricultural tax but have already run out of rice. The other three have paid their agricultural tax but are now short on rice.” Under the category “public opinion,” the report stated that people felt “the estimated yield is too high (what should be 17 tạ is set at 23 tạ).”

The report included a section dealing with the “aspirations” of the people moving forward. First, villagers “want the agricultural tax to be reduced.” Second, they wanted to be able to borrow rice seed. Third, they wanted to borrow buffalos. And fourth, “poor and middle peasants want to be able to donate land.” This last aspiration raises a number of questions. First, why would poor, hungry peasants desire to “donate” their land rather than sell it? Second, why did this need to be expressed as an “aspiration” to the visiting cadre, as though they were not being permitted to do so? Third, why were poor and middle peasants in this village trying to own less land in the first place?

Answers to these questions were suggested in the report’s account of Hoa Tân village. There it was claimed that the village had collected 421 tạ of the 528 tạ of rice that was required of the community for the agricultural tax and that 46 of the 109 families in the village had been able to pay the tax. As for the “public opinion,” the report writer described the people as saying: “no matter what, we will have to donate our land because we have no buffalos. If the government does not accept [the donated land] then we will just abandon the field and not bother to harvest it.” It appears that many peasants wanted to reduce their amount of farmed land to ease the burden of agricultural tax.

Đặng Thai Mai Letter to Trường Chinh

On June 19, 1953, one of the DRV’s leading intellectuals, the fifty-one-year-old literature scholar, Đặng Thai Mai, penned a letter to his old friend, Trường Chinh. Thai Mai wrote from his native Nghệ An province in Interzone 4, where

he apparently spent much of the war. In the letter's opening lines, he explained to Chinh, "I am sending this letter up to you to present a few more things. I also sent a letter to the Interzone 4 Party branch (K.U.L.K.IV). But there are some issues that I need to report so that the [Party] Central Committee has a clear understanding."¹⁰

The first issue concerned taxes for 1953:

On the issue of 1953 taxes, I already put forward a couple of ideas in my previous letter. Now, after having inspected the situation myself—after having asked a few comrades and a number of regular people [dân chúng], I hope that you can pay some attention to the issue of tax rate [thuế biểu]. Maybe Nghệ An province's yield levels need to be reconsidered. In 1951, usually four bushels of harvested rice stalk (including the flowers) was calculated to produce one tạ [100 kilograms] of rice. In 1952, the province Party leadership set the amount of rice required for each district. Each district would then divide the required amount among the subdistricts. There are some subdistricts that have set the rice productivity level at two and a half bushels for 100 kilograms of rice, though the majority of districts were set at three bushels. It was the same for Hà Tĩnh province. The result is that there are some places where an acre [mẫu] of paddy is required to produce a yield of 3,200 or 3,500 kilograms. In the past, even the best rice fields were only expected to yield 2,500 or 2,800 kilograms of rice per acre. I asked many peasants who farmed one or two acres and they all said that there was no way of meeting that yield level. I dare to put forward this issue because I have followed the situation in my region pretty carefully. And the reality is that this year I have heard many peasants complaining a lot about the attitude of cadres who set the [agricultural tax] yield levels. Therefore, I feel that I need to report this situation to the Zone Party branch and to the Central Committee.

To buttress his point, Đặng Thai Mai referred to the recent economic report of Maksim Saburov, who was the Chairman of the Soviet Union's State Planning Committee. Saburov's report had been delivered at the CPSU's 19th Congress the previous October. Thai Mai pointed out that Saburov, in his discussion of the "Five-Year-Plan to Develop the Soviet Union," had stated that the country, in its estimation of the yields for irrigated lands, had only planned for a productivity level of 4,000 to 5,000 kilograms per hectare. "Therefore, four years from now, even with their technology, even with their manpower, the Soviets are only expecting to reach a productivity level of 2,000 to 2,500 kilograms

per half-hectare, which is still more than one of our acres (in Central Vietnam, an acre is 4,900 square meters).” The strong implication of Thai Mai’s letter was that the Party Central Committee was out of touch with reality.

In the politest terms, Thai Mai also complained to Trường Chinh about the party’s policy of political struggle against the landlord class:

Second thing: the current struggle movement being led by the Central Committee surely will bring about the good result that the people’s regime will be respected. However, at the same time, it would be good if the Party and government could send an inspection group here to determine whether the people had any anger or concerns with how the general policy was being implemented. That inspection group could then report to the Zone Party branch and the Central Committee so that all local shortcomings could be adjusted. I am certain that the result would be very good for the political awakening and confidence of the people [in the Party leadership].

Đặng Thai Mai found it particularly galling that the granddaughter of the great patriot Phan Bội Châu (1868–1945) had been ensnared in the growing political campaign against “landlords.” This woman’s husband was a lieutenant in the DRV army. Back in her Nghệ An village, she served in the women’s branch of the United Vietnam Association. Cautiously, Thai Mai pointed out that this granddaughter of Phan Bội Châu rented out two acres (one mẫu) of land because her husband was absent serving the military effort. “In the recent May harvest, that paddy produced ten bushels of rice, but she only received received 5 ‘armfuls’ [*lượm*] when each bushel has 8 armfuls (there are places where landlords have to reduce rents by 85% . . .).” As a result, Thai Mai pointed out, her family “lived in extremely difficult circumstances.”

In his letter, Thai Mai also let Trường Chinh know that Phan Bội Châu had another granddaughter in the village. She only had a third of an acre of paddy on which to raise her two children of nine and twelve years. They only had enough food to eat every other meal. Thai Mai requested that Trường Chinh arrange with the Interzone party branch to have these two children sent to China for study, insisting that his motivation for this request was not based on a “notion of how to treat the descendants of a great revolutionary.” Rather, the main reason was that Phan Bội Châu still had a fair number of admirers in Nghệ An and Hà Tĩnh provinces. “If we allow his family to live in miserable circumstances, it creates an opportunity for those who are dissatisfied to spread criticisms. This is truly a small matter, yet I still wrote this letter to you—please do not blame me too much.” In a revealing concluding sentence, Đặng Thai Mai wrote to

Trương Chinh: “Please believe that I always try to be close to the actual lives of the people.”

The primary causes of peasant hardship in 1953 were the disruptions and difficulties brought about by the war along with the severe tax burden placed on the countryside by the party leaders, who had no choice but to inspire, cajole, and, if needed, force peasants to feed the DRV’s war effort. In comparison to these things, feudal exploitation by local elites does not seem to have been a meaningful factor contributing to the spreading hunger crisis in 1953. Over the seven years of war, the key drain on peasant rice certainly shifted from local elites to the DRV state.

This new tax burden, extracted initially by the party-state through means of straight requisition and then through an agricultural tax based on (highly elevated) estimated yields, seems to have been great enough to kill much of the joy of free land distributions carried out by the regime since taking power. In the reports, we see examples of peasants who had returned to the local party apparatus land that had been allocated to them. Other peasants (in Nghệ An) apparently wished to do so as a means of reducing their tax burden and avoiding the accumulation of debt to the DRV state. Thus, the archival file on hunger in 1953 also does not support another key pillar of the regime’s official justification for land reform—the notion of great land hunger among peasants in the DRV countryside. Had peasants been offered these land distributions with a lower tax obligation to the DRV state, such that the receipt of land correlated to an increase in the peasants’ disposable income, no doubt the land hunger claimed by the party leaders would have rapidly materialized.

Let’s consider for a moment how some of the above-mentioned reports about peasant attitudes and behaviors might have appeared to Politburo members in 1953. These were patriotic men who had spent most of their adult lives working as professional revolutionaries for the liberation of their country and for the dream of a socialist Vietnam. In many cases, their careers had involved long, brutal stays in prison. Four years ago, Chinese Communists had prevailed, meaning that the world’s largest country was now socialist. Vietnam lay on the southern border of a unified Communist bloc that covered most of Asia and Europe. In late 1950 and early 1951, the DRV forces had turned Soviet and Chinese military support into a devastating blow to France, nearly taking Hanoi. For the last couple of years (1952 and 1953), the DRV had held the initiative in the fighting but had not been able to deliver the dramatic victory needed to end the conflict. The war was now in its seventh year. Tens of thousands of Vietnamese had been killed or wounded, but the French were wavering in their resolve.

In the light of these circumstances, the thinking of Thành, Trường Chinh, Phạm Văn Đồng, Võ Nguyên Giáp, and other party leaders about the behavior of the rural population can be imagined: We have the French on the ropes; tens of thousands of our soldiers and civilians have already been killed; we desperately need more food for our troops. How can villagers demand that we subtract their fixed-rice-purchase contributions from the agricultural tax? How can poor peasants refuse to farm temporarily distributed land on the grounds that the tax rate is too high? How can other villagers intentionally reduce their area of cultivation to limit their agricultural tax exposure? How can villagers complain that the recruitment of people's porters occurs at inconvenient times? War is inherently inconvenient and cannot be managed according to your schedule. What about the inconvenience of having been colonized for eighty years?

Điện Biên Phủ and Geneva, 1954

Toward the end of 1953, the DRV leaders learned that the French had parachuted six thousand troops into a remote valley on the Laotian border. It appeared that the French, as they had done at Nà Sản, were going to construct an entrenched camp in this valley, named Điện Biên Phủ, and tempt the DRV forces into another costly attack. Actually, the French intention was to prevent the DRV forces from attacking westward into Laos. If the French did not contest such a push, who would believe in the concept of the French Union (i.e., French Indochina)? In most respects, the valley of Điện Biên Phủ was a more advantageous battlefield from the DRV perspective than had been the case at Nà Sản a year earlier.

During late 1953, the international environment had also changed in important ways that would ultimately benefit the DRV side. First, in July, participants in the Korean War had agreed to an armistice. This meant that more attention and weapons from the Chinese and Soviets could be channeled the DRV's way, though the French and their allies, the State of Vietnam, could hope for a similar boost from the United States. Second, the Great Powers, notably the United States and the Soviet Union, were becoming increasingly interested in convening some sort of large diplomatic conference to resolve the situations in Korea and Indochina. These diplomatic developments suddenly gave the showdown in the valley of Điện Biên Phủ a meaning that the French had not anticipated. Rather than being the first stage of a two-year plan (the "Navarre Plan") to win the war, Điện Biên Phủ became the last major battle of the First Indochina War.

The Lead-up to Điện Biên Phủ

In the middle of 1953, the DRV leaders probably felt themselves to be in an agonizing position. On the one hand, their military capacity was heading in a positive direction. Their Leninist organizational techniques—the focus on

discipline, the centralization of power, the maintenance of secrecy, the careful control of information, and the vigorous and flexible use of propaganda—were well suited to the leadership of an army and the management of a war. Once the party leaders had a young man in their military system, they were usually able to train him and motivate him to fight effectively.

On the other hand, the economic situation of the DRV was headed just as steadily in the opposite direction. What was working for young men in the army was not working for peasant agricultural producers in the villages, whose results, in direct contrast to those of the army, were worsening. Though Chinese food aid,¹ along with foodstuffs requisitioned from Cambodian and Laotian farmers,² must have helped to some extent, internal party reports on the food situation suggest that whatever these outside sources amounted to, it was not nearly enough to offset the dwindling supply. All DRV-controlled areas were now, more or less, on different points of the same downward sloping continuum whose end was famine.

The steady spread of the food crisis had a terrible logic to it that must have weighed on the party leaders: with every harvest, rice collection became more imperative and more difficult as the amount needed to feed the army, bureaucracy, and now, increasingly, areas suffering from famine, became a larger portion of a shrinking pie. Eventually, a tipping point would be reached when the collection of rice from villages would start to condemn a certain percentage of the community to severe malnutrition or even death, taking more people out of the workforce, resulting in yet more land left fallow, further decreases in production, worse famine, and so on. At that point, no matter how skilled, brave, and well-equipped the army was, the logic of the food crisis would overpower all other efforts. The DRV was not at that point in the summer of 1953, but its leaders must have recognized that they were heading there.

Looking at the situation with their French foes, the DRV leaders could see a similar combination of positives and negatives. On the one hand, there were some bright signs in France that the DRV's opponents might be edging toward an abandonment of the fight. On June 26, 1953, the new French prime minister, Joseph Laniel, promised the French people that "his government would search tirelessly for an end to the conflict, whether that would be during the negotiations that followed the signing of an armistice in Korea or in any other negotiations taken in agreement with the Associated States [of Indochina]." This was the first time that a French leader had put in writing the government's determination to end the war through any means, including negotiations.³

For many people in France, the Korean War armistice, which was concluded a month after Laniel's statement, stirred up hopes of an armistice in Indochina as well.⁴

While pleased that French popular opinion was pressuring democratically elected French political leaders to speak of ending the war, the DRV leaders were, at the same time, wary of this discourse. They appear to have feared that such talk of peace coming from France would infect their own side with similar dreams. An August 16, 1953 editorial in *The People* explained how readers of the newspaper (i.e., rank-and-file party members and anyone else connected with the DRV side) should interpret the Korean armistice and the peace discourse coming from the French government. Any talk of peace from French politicians other than Communist Party ones was a "Machiavellian scheme" meant to "fool" the French public and to "dampen the fighting spirit of the Vietnamese people."

The editorial insisted that the "French colonialists and the American interventionists" still hoped to defeat the DRV and were looking toward "stepping up" their war effort to do so. The new French general, Henri Navarre, the article stated, was "owned by the Americans," and "the Navarre plan is the Americans' plan."⁵ In the fall of 1953, the DRV leaders were able to piece together the basic elements of the "Navarre Plan," which involved another two whole years of fighting. Nguyễn Tất Thành and his comrades in the Politburo must have felt that their cynical interpretation of the French government's peace discourse was justified.⁶

The Navarre Plan

When he had selected Navarre to take command of the Indochina war effort, the French prime minister, René Mayer, had informed his new hire that the government was looking for "an honorable departure" from Indochina. As usual, such a departure required a convincing military victory that would put France in a strong negotiating position. In this sense, the DRV analysis in *The People* was not off the mark: The French government wanted peace, but most felt that there was still work to be done on the battlefield before a sufficiently "honorable" peace could be secured. The possibility of destroying the DRV forces and ending the war through force of arms alone had been questioned by French political and military leaders since the CCP victory in 1949. From that point onward, such a hope seems to have faded from most people's realm of possibility.⁷

As mentioned, Navarre's plan stretched over a period of two years. During the first year (the upcoming autumn campaign), French forces would "contain" the

DRV forces, which meant avoiding major confrontations in the northern third of the country where DRV divisions were based, seeking instead softer targets in central and southern Vietnam. This cautious approach would buy time for further training of the Associated State of Vietnam's army as the key part of a broader effort to build up the forces of the anticommunist French Union.

Navarre envisioned that, during the following year (1954–1955), he would have larger and stronger forces under his command, along with a boost in American military aid. This would enable him to carry out a large-scale offensive in the North, striking painful blows against the DRV's main forces and convincing Hồ Chí Minh to negotiate. To facilitate this plan, Navarre asked the French military command for an additional twelve battalions (roughly 30,000 troops) along with an increase in aircraft for bombing and transport. The French military command in Paris was only able to provide him with an additional nine battalions and a modest boost in aircraft.⁸

In July, shortly before departing for Indochina, Navarre had attended final briefings with the French Joint Chiefs and the National Defense Committee to discuss his plan and clarify his mission in Indochina. According to the historian Bernard Fall, there had been some talk in these meetings about whether Navarre should challenge the DRV in Laos or not. Navarre had felt strongly that the DRV should not be allowed to march unopposed through Laos as this would damage the morale of France's allies in Indochina.⁹

A similar logic applied vis-à-vis the ethnic minority groups on the Laos-Vietnam border—French efforts over the past couple of years to recruit, arm, and train ethnic minority members living in the high region between the countries had borne some fruit.¹⁰ It seemed worthwhile to prevent this part of Indochina from coming under complete DRV control. Ultimately, France's National Defense Committee left the decision about Laos up in the air. Receiving no specific directions to deviate from past commitments to defend Laos, which seemed to be reaffirmed subsequently by France's October 22, 1953 defense treaty with the Kingdom of Laos, Navarre planned to contest the DRV in this neighboring country.¹¹

He and the other French commanders decided that the current center of operations in the northwestern region, Nà Sản, was not close enough to the Laotian border to challenge the expected DRV push into that country. Traveling westward from Hanoi toward Laos, Nà Sản was about 290 kilometers from the city, only about two-thirds the distance to the northwestern section of the Lao border where the French thought that the DRV would begin a stab toward Luang Prabang (Laos's traditional capital). A better location for the defense of

Laos, in the eyes of Navarre and other French military leaders, was the border town of Điện Biên Phủ.¹² It lay an additional 180 kilometers west of Nà Sản along Route 6 at the junction of three major roads, one of which cut straight across the northern part of Laos. Điện Biên Phủ took on additional importance when the French decided to make it the new capital of the recently created (1948) “Tai Federation,” which comprised the mountainous region between Laos and Vietnam.¹³

There were those within the French command, however, who questioned the logic of creating a base at Điện Biên Phủ, arguing that it would not have the intended effect of “blocking” the DRV troops from entering Laos. Air force leaders were concerned that Điện Biên Phủ lay at the outer limits of their fighter planes’ fuel capacity, allowing only a few minutes of air support. Others pointed to the valley’s frequent rain and fog, which would cut the air bridge between the base and supplies in Hanoi.¹⁴

At some point in August and September, the DRV leaders and their Chinese advisers decided that their next offensive would be, as the French had anticipated, northwesterly toward and into Laos. There had been some discussion of a major offensive in the Red River delta, but ultimately this had been abandoned for the safer option toward the northwest, where remoteness would mitigate the French advantage in firepower. As usual, French intelligence services, through both listening to radio conversations and following DRV troop movements via aerial photography, were soon able to piece together the basic outline of their opponents’ plan.¹⁵

On November 2, 1953, Navarre called on subordinates to prepare for the occupation of Điện Biên Phủ, code-named “Operation Castor.” Later that month, the operation began with the drop of a parachute battalion into the valley. After a few hours of combat with a regiment of DRV troops guarding the valley, the French forces were able to seize control of the main town (Mường Thanh) in the valley and prepare the way for four more parachute battalions and a company of engineers. These additional troops arrived over the next three days. By November 25, the French forces had gained control over the valley and improved the airstrip enough to begin fortifying the base at Điện Biên Phủ.

Between General Navarre and his second-in-command, there had been some miscommunication about the actual function of the base at Điện Biên Phủ. Navarre had assumed that it would be made into an entrenched camp much like the recently abandoned one at Nà Sản, though he had thought that it would be of only secondary importance. The commander of the French forces in the Tonkin theater, however, had thought that the new base would only be used as

a “mooring point” for launching guerrilla-style attacks on DRV troops menacing Laos or the “Tai Federation.” This confusion would have disastrous consequences for the French Union side.

Neither Navarre nor any other French military leader expected that Điện Biên Phủ would become the decisive battle of the war.¹⁶ This misunderstanding over the purpose of the garrison at Điện Biên Phủ meant that it was not fortified to the extent that the previous entrenched camp at Nà Sản had been. By the time the French military leadership realized that the garrison was surrounded by four DRV divisions (roughly 45,000 soldiers) and that the upcoming Geneva Conference would give the impending battle an enormous unanticipated significance, it was too late to improve the camp’s deficient fortifications.¹⁷

The DRV “Combat Plan” for Điện Biên Phủ

While General Navarre and other French military leaders had not expected Điện Biên Phủ to assume the importance that it eventually did, the DRV leaders had quickly grasped the battle’s potential significance. A December 6, 1953 report to the Politburo by Võ Nguyên Giáp estimated that the French had about six battalions in the valley by early December and noted their efforts to improve the airstrip and build fortifications. Perhaps the French command did intend to take a stand at the new base in Điện Biên Phủ:

Right now we cannot yet determine [French intensions]. However, the Central Committee is determined to destroy the enemy and liberate the region of Lai Châu-Phongsaly all the way to Luang Prabang during the Winter-Spring [period]. Therefore, we must focus on and prepare for a situation in which the enemy strengthens [its forces] into a collective entrenched fortification [at Điện Biên Phủ].

In this situation, the battle at Điện Biên Phủ would be the largest attack on a fortified position up to this point, not less than Nà Sản, with the road even farther [away]. Therefore, our preparations will have many difficulties, and only with a rapid and massive effort to concentrate our forces will we be able do so in time. But if, with determination, we can overcome our difficulties and carry out the campaign, this victory would be a huge one.¹⁸

Giáp’s “Combat Plan” estimated that the DRV forces would need to commit a total of 43,000 troops to the Điện Biên Phủ campaign. The French garrison would be attacked in two stages, the first of which ending in late January, 1954. At that point, DRV forces would pause for about twenty days to “make

adjustments” and integrate reinforcements before beginning the second stage of the battle. According to Giáp’s calculations, DRV troops would be able to attack for about forty-five days, meaning that the campaign would need to be completed by early May.¹⁹

With respect to supplies, the DRV’s plan estimated that the attack would require 4,200 tons of rice, not including the additional rice needed to feed the roughly 30,000 “people’s porters” mobilized for the campaign. Where would the 4,200 tons of rice come from? Giáp stated that the DRV would “make the most of the potential of areas in the Northwest, with the rest to be taken from [the provinces of] Phú Thọ and Thanh Hóa.” In addition to the 4,200 tons of rice, the Điện Biên Phủ campaign would require one hundred tons of dried vegetables, one hundred tons of meat, eighty tons of salt, and twelve tons of sugar, “all of which will mainly be brought up from Thanh Hóa province,” the plan stated.²⁰

For some perspective on how much food this was, the reader might consider that the average tractor-trailer truck today (the largest on the road) carries a maximum load of 30 tons, meaning that the amount of rice needed for the troops alone would be equivalent to what could be carried by at least 120 of these trucks (for some less-dense foodstuffs, the volume of 30 tons would far exceed the spatial capacity of one truck).

How would this enormous quantity of food be squeezed out of a local population that was desperately short of food, with pockets of famine appearing in all DRV-controlled regions? Fortunately for the DRV, their Chinese allies were apparently able to rush 1,700 tons of grain to Điện Biên Phủ, lowering the burden somewhat.²¹ Still, that left at least another 3,000 tons of rice to be collected. As was the case throughout the war, this difficult and essential task would fall primarily on the shoulders of party members at the grassroots level, the people who collected the agricultural tax from their village communities, who recruited the “people’s porters” to carry the rice and other supplies, and who drafted young men to fight the battles. For most peasants in the DRV-controlled areas, it was these local party members who were the face of the regime. As we have seen, they were a source of great frustration to the party leaders, who tended to blame them for the disappointing results of the party’s various economic policies and for the hardships of rural life in general. The land reform program had already marked these local party members for purge.

By December 27, 1953, the DRV forces were in place and had cut off all escape routes from Điện Biên Phủ. The 12,000 French Union troops in the garrison

were surrounded by about 45,000 DRV troops. Despite this seemingly dire situation, the French command apparently remained confident that the garrison would be able to defeat any attempts to overrun it much the same way the similarly outnumbered camp at Nà Sản had done the previous year.²²

The Possibility of Negotiations

During August and September 1953, while General Navarre was thinking about the implementation of his two-year plan, the Soviet Union made public proposals to the United States, Great Britain, and France that “five-power” talks be held among them and, controversially, that they include the PRC. The purpose of these talks was to “reduce tensions” throughout the world. At that time, Moscow was trying to raise the prestige of the PRC on the world stage. The United States, still bitter over both the “loss of China” in 1949 and, more recently, the U.S. military’s retreat before PRC forces in North Korea, remained adamantly opposed to any diplomatic move that could be construed as a *de facto* recognition of the PRC. These Soviet initiatives for “five-power talks” were enthusiastically supported by Beijing in their press.²³

As historians point out, the three Western powers disagreed on how Communist China should be handled. The United States disliked the idea of negotiating with the PRC, but France viewed such negotiations as a possible means of extricating itself from the war in Indochina. On November 3, the Soviet Union backed off its insistence on “five-power” talks with the PRC and returned to the “four-power” model for a proposed conference limited to the situations in Germany (unification) and Austria (neutrality).²⁴ Undeterred by this setback, Moscow continued to promote the prestige of the PRC and to campaign for a five-power conference at a later date.²⁵

Two days after the Soviet Union’s November 3, 1953 appeal to the Great Powers, a Swedish journalist based in Paris and working through the Swedish embassy in Peking was able to forward some questions to Thành about the possibility of negotiating an armistice in Indochina. It appears that the Soviet proposals for talks (and their warm support by the PRC) had caused a change of heart among Thành and his comrades. On November 29, 1953, the Swedish newspaper *Expressen* published Thành’s response, which was written in English and transferred to the Swedish newspaper via the country’s embassy in Peking. To the question of whether he and his government welcomed negotiations, Thành wrote:

If the French colonialists continue their war of aggression, the Vietnamese people are determined to continue the patriotic war until final victory. If, having learned a lesson during these past years of war, the French Government wishes to carry out a ceasefire, to engage in negotiations as a means of solving the question of Vietnam by peaceful means, the people and government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam are ready for that motion.²⁶

To the question of whether a “neutral” country could act as a go-between to facilitate peace negotiations, Thành replied that, although the DRV “welcomed” such efforts, the negotiation of a ceasefire was “primarily” the task of the French and DRV governments. There was not a single mention or even hint in the letter of the State of Vietnam’s existence. Not surprisingly, the prospect of Paris coming to some sort of separate agreement with the DRV raised anxiety among members and supporters of the State of Vietnam. Within days of the Hồ Chí Minh letter, anticommunist nationalists whose fates were tied to the State of Vietnam began pressing France with renewed urgency for complete independence. They also pressed their Head of State, the former emperor, Bảo Đại, to make governmental changes that would give the State of Vietnam a more nationalist and independent character.²⁷

In his Hồ Chí Minh letter, Thành attempted to sow dissent among the forces opposing him, suggesting that the French people and the Vietnamese people shared a common enemy—the United States:

With respect to the French people and French peace soldiers, I, as before, express my sympathy and affection. Today, it is not only the independence of the Vietnamese people that is seriously violated, but that of France itself. The American imperialists, on the one hand, pressure the French colonialists to continue and expand their war of aggression against Vietnam, making France grow weaker as it continues to fight, with the intention of taking France’s place in Indochina. On the other hand, [the Americans] are forcing the French to approve the treaty on the defense of Europe, which means allowing German militarism to live again.²⁸

Thus, the key danger to Indochina was not the French colonialists but the American imperialists, who were waiting in the wings to seize Indochina after a depleted France had been brushed aside. In Thành’s conceptualization, French military efforts were inextricably linked with American aid while the DRV was apparently a completely autonomous actor. He made no mention of the relationship between the DRV and its two big allies, the Soviet Union and PRC.

Similarly, Thành highlighted the political complexity of France, stressing contradictions between its people, its “peace soldiers,” and its colonialists. He contrasted this with the simplicity of Vietnam, which he depicted as having only one people and one state—that of the DRV. Despite the party’s move to land reform, the regime’s most ambitious and radical project of socialist transformation to date, Thành made no mention of ideology as a source of contention in Vietnamese political life. In his *Expressen* letter, he conceptualized the conflict between the DRV and France as simply between French and Vietnamese patriotism on the one side and French colonialism allied with American imperialism on the other.

Thành’s image of Vietnamese, Indochinese, and world politics in his November 20 letter to *Expressen* hints at some of the party’s subsequent policy choices during and immediately following the Geneva Conference (namely the attempt to ally with France again). It also shows, as the historian Pierre Asselin stresses, that there was a convergence of interests between the Soviet Union, PRC, and DRV on the desirability of keeping America out of Indochina.²⁹

It was a fine line that Thành and the party leaders had to walk when depicting their situation to the Soviets and Chinese. On the one hand, America’s support for the anticommunist forces in Vietnam and its steps toward direct intervention provided the DRV leaders with an opportunity to sell themselves to the Soviets and Chinese as proxy warriors against the United States, the great enemy of the Communist camp. No doubt Thành hoped that this would make the DRV’s two key allies more willing to increase the flow of weapons and aid. On the other hand, it was possible that this narrative would have the opposite effect on Soviet and Chinese thinking, convincing them to keep their aid at limited levels so as not to provoke an American intervention in Indochina. Ironically, Thành’s efforts to promote the DRV as the vanguard of the struggle against the American-led “imperialist camp” may have made it more difficult for him to complain when the Soviets and Chinese, a few months later, used that American threat in Indochina as a reason to negotiate a ceasefire at Geneva.

The Road to the Geneva Conference

Still determined to promote the PRC, the Soviet foreign minister, Vyacheslav Molotov, had used his opening speech at the Berlin Conference (January 25 to February 18, 1954) to make another pitch for the Soviet goal of five-power talks. At the conference, the Soviets, Americans, French, and British made no headway on the issue of German reunification or Austrian neutralization; the

Soviets continued to reject the proposal that Germany be reunited through free elections supervised by the four powers—a method that obviously would have resulted in the end of East Germany. And the Western powers similarly continued to reject the Soviet proposal for the unification of Korea.

By making some concessions to American semantic demands, however, and taking advantage of French eagerness to end the conflict in Indochina through negotiations, Molotov was finally able to secure his wish. In the final week of negotiations in Berlin, his three Western counterparts agreed to a five-power conference on the situations in Korea and Indochina. The final communiqué of the Berlin Conference, released on February 19, 1954, stated that a meeting of the United States, Great Britain, France, the Soviet Union, and the People's Republic of China, along with "other interested states," would begin on April 26, 1954. The conference would tackle Korea first and Indochina second.³⁰ Thus was the Geneva Conference born.

The coming Geneva Conference was not good news for General Navarre, who saw how it jeopardized his two-year "Navarre Plan" to end the war. How, though, was news of the conference received by the DRV leaders? Without access to the transcripts of discussions between Thành and other top party leaders, we are forced to interpret the regime's public statements. The VWP's main organ, *The People*, printed five Geneva Conference articles, which, viewed together, suggest a few important things.³¹ First, the DRV leaders initially downplayed the prospect of peace talks on Indochina. Not until February 21, 1954 did the *The People* reveal that the proposed Geneva Conference would address the situation in Indochina. And this was done in a discreet and blasé manner that seems to have been intended not to generate excitement about the prospect of peace. As the February 21, 1954 article stated:

However, from this initial victory to actually resolving international problems by means of peaceful negotiations still requires that we pass through an intense and fierce stage of struggle. It is in the nature of the imperialists to start wars in order to gain great profits. Therefore, the people who love world peace still need to increase their vigilance and resolutely struggle further. Only in this way can we stop those who start wars and carry out aggression, forcing them to respect the will of the people.³²

But this low-profile, lukewarm DRV press coverage of the Geneva Conference announcement should not necessarily be taken as a reflection of how the party leaders felt about the news. Since the Soviets had promoted the five-power talks doggedly, Thành may have surmised (or have been directly informed) that

Moscow and Beijing would be eager to see a result—that is, an armistice in Indochina—from the negotiations. The shape of that armistice, however, would have much to do with what happened on the battlefield over the next few months. Whether or not the DRV leaders were privately excited or relieved by the prospect of an armistice, they surely appreciated the psychological danger of this news: It would be harder to compel soldiers to risk their lives in an important final burst of bloodletting if they believed that an armistice were only a few months away.

The Battle of Điện Biên Phủ Begins: March 11, 1954

As these preparations for the Geneva Conference were happening, the roughly 45,000 DRV soldiers were tightening their grip around the 15,000-man French garrison in Điện Biên Phủ. On March 11, when the DRV forces began to shell the garrison, using new heavy artillery that had only just become available from China, they quickly destroyed six fighter aircraft parked by the airstrip. This immediately took from the French forces a major weapon. As Võ Nguyên Giáp pointed out in a report that he wrote for a March 17, 1954 conference on the progress of the battle:

But [the enemy's] biggest failure is their incorrect estimation. They thought that we could only destroy "support points" [point d'appui] in the style of Nà Sản, but that we could not destroy "centers of resistance" in the style of Điện Biên Phủ, especially because they sent their best troops to guard them. The enemy thought that we would not dare attack Điện Biên Phủ, so they landed troops at Quy Nhơn [in southern Vietnam], further dispersing their forces there. That ill-timed operation has created yet more difficulties for the enemy, putting them in an even more defensive position.

Now, [at Điện Biên Phủ] Him Lam and Independence Hills have been destroyed; the airstrip has been limited; dozens of airplanes have been shot down or destroyed [on the ground]; and their supplies have dwindled with one part having been burned. It is just as we have said: today it is the enemy's troops who are the ones worried about heavy artillery; it is the enemy's troops who are the ones worried about fatigue; it is the enemy's airplanes that are worried about our anti-aircraft guns.³³

The key weakness of the entrenched camp's construction (lack of protection for the airstrip) was thus exposed immediately. Indeed, within two days of fighting, the DRV forces had captured a hillock positioned a few hundred meters off

the northern end of the runway. Now able to aim their guns down it, the DRV forces rendered the airstrip virtually unusable. This left parachute drops as the only means of resupplying the French forces at the garrison.

During the weeks leading up to the start of the battle in March, the DRV forces had installed their artillery pieces high on the jungle-covered slopes of the surrounding mountains. Carefully camouflaged and aimed downward with direct line of fire, these guns were virtually impossible to spot and extremely accurate. Moreover, misunderstandings between the French military leadership about the purpose of the garrison had meant that its defenses were only partially constructed, leaving its defenders with much less protection than had been the case at Nà Sản the previous year.³⁴ The DRV forces attacked the various hills and knolls surrounding the French position, making significant inroads, but suffering terrible losses themselves. Finally, on May 7, 1954, they were able to overrun the last pockets of French resistance at the garrison, securing one of the most remarkable victories of the 20th century.

Christopher Goscha is the first scholar to tackle directly the issue of the battle's terrible physical toll on the DRV side, a topic that remains taboo in Vietnam.³⁵ By examining specialized party histories of the DRV medical effort during the war and by combining these with a few candid accounts of the battle by medical personnel, Goscha was able to capture some of the horror of the battle from the DRV perspective. What ultimately emerges from his account is normal young men (i.e., reluctant to die no matter how noble the cause) pushed by ambitious political leaders into a World War I–style trench battle, with limbs, blood, corpses, and the dying strewn about the landscape. Internal party reports on the battle suggest that Giáp and other party leaders found their peasant soldiers' fears, hesitations, and sometimes outright insubordination (all referred to as "rightist deviations") to be frustrating and disappointing.

A thirty-page report delivered by the Secretary of the Central Military Committee (Nguyễn Chí Thanh) to a May 29, 1954 meeting of commissars and department heads involved in the battle of Điện Biên Phủ captures the extent of this top-level frustration. It should be noted that the report was delivered nine days before the DRV forces finally prevailed over the French garrison. A theme of the report was "negative rightist deviationist thinking" among commanders and soldiers on the battlefield. According to Giáp, these actions were manifest in two forms:

The first is hesitation, fear of difficulty, fear of hardship, fear of death, fear of injury, fear of depletion, and submission to fatigue. Standing before these difficulties, [cadres] lack the resolve to overcome them. With respect

to the enemy, [cadres] lack the will to destroy him. With respect to a cadre's own mistakes and those of his soldiers, there is a lack of resolve to struggle [against them]. [Cadres and soldiers] see the enemy but do not want to shoot him. They have weapons but do not hang on to them and do not want to use them to strike the enemy. Though in a good battle position, [cadres and soldiers] do not want to exploit it to destroy the enemy. They are not eager and enthusiastic about being victorious in the campaign, about improving the army, and about benefitting the revolution, the Party, and the people.³⁶

The second form in which “negative rightest deviationist thinking” became manifest was a false outward appearance of confidence and enthusiasm made to conceal a reluctance to confront the enemy:

[They] do not want to find out the enemy's actual situation for fear that it would uncover difficulties that need to be resolved; they fear having to fight bravely in difficult conditions. They want to score easy victories, and, as a result, they frequently fail. They are not absolutely revolutionary. Our revolutionary responsibility is to fight to the end in order to secure independence for our people, peace for the world, and to implement communism. Victory in one fight is nothing but a grain of sand on an ocean beach, and yet they quickly conclude that [their small victory] is more than enough already, a major accomplishment. As a result, they do not continue to struggle resolutely. That is “half-assed” [*nửa vời*] revolution, which means not revolution.³⁷

The DRV victory at Điện Biên Phủ greatly strengthened their position at the Geneva Conference. For the French, the defeat sent a pulse of panic and despair through their country, “as though [France were] trying to drown its errors in a sea of grief.”³⁸ The DRV also benefited from the leverage gained by taking 10,000 prisoners from the battle. Thành and his lieutenants understandably decided that these prisoners would be used as human shields to give the badly battered DRV troops a respite from strafing by French fighter planes during the march toward the Red River delta.³⁹

The Geneva Negotiations on Indochina: May 8–July 21, 1954

The section of the Geneva Conference devoted to negotiating a ceasefire in Indochina stretched from May 8 to July 21, 1954—almost two and a half months. The complexity and length of these negotiations, with a game-changing battle

(Điện Biên Phủ) ending just as the talks began, key actors coming and going, a French government changing midway through, and different levels of negotiations taking place simultaneously, make pithy descriptions of the conference difficult. The most high-profile negotiators were arguably Molotov (USSR), Zhou Enlai (PRC), Phạm Văn Đồng (DRV), Georges Bidault (France), and Anthony Eden (UK), with input from Bảo Đại (State of Vietnam), John Foster Dulles (US), Walter Bedell Smith (US), Phoui Sananikone (The Kingdom of Laos), Tek Phan (The Kingdom of Cambodia), and others.

The French foreign minister, Georges Bidault, laid out his government's ceasefire proposal on May 8, 1954, the opening day of the Indochina negotiations. The earliest DRV proposal for a position at the Geneva Conference was titled, "A Comprehensive Solution for Restoring Peace in Indochina," dated April 4, 1954. This was more than a month before the DRV victory at Điện Biên Phủ, yet far enough along in the battle to know that victory was the most likely outcome.⁴⁰ It appears that this proposal was never publicized but rather formed the basis of the official DRV proposal presented by Phạm Văn Đồng over a month later on May 10.

The negotiations bogged down quickly over a few issues. The first was neutralization of Cambodia and Laos, which meant the evacuation of DRV forces from those countries. The second was whether Vietnam would be partitioned, and if so, how? A third difficulty was the issue of "free elections" to unify the country. The DRV wanted these elections to happen within six months while the French wanted more time. A fourth sticking point was the issue of supervision. The DRV wanted all supervision to be carried out "in house" rather than through an international body. Eventually they yielded to the idea of an international supervisory body, but there was much disagreement over who would serve on that body. What combination of countries would be acceptable to both sides?⁴¹

How were the DRV and France able to overcome these obstacles and reach an agreement? As a Canadian participant in the conference later explained, the truce was made possible by "a combination on the one side of Dulles' veiled threats and the willingness of Eden and Mendes-France to negotiate, and, on the other side, . . . the Chinese and Russians pressing Hanoi to compromise in order to keep the Americans out of Indochina."⁴²

One of the reasons most scholars have concluded that the Soviets and Chinese must have exerted "great pressure" on the VWP leaders to compromise stems from the fact that the DRV delegation, in its first proposal for a partition

line, put forward the 13th parallel. This line would have given them, roughly speaking, all of northern and central Vietnam. The French proposal of the 18th parallel would have left the DRV with northern Vietnam (Tonkin) and a modest-sized slice of northern central Vietnam. Zhou Enlai's original proposal from March 2 had suggested as a goal the 16th parallel, 333 kilometers north of the 13th parallel. The difference between the DRV proposal and the French one was 555 kilometers—no small distance. Ultimately, the two sides agreed on the 17th parallel, meaning that the French conceded 111 kilometers and the DRV 444. Had the DRV been able to secure the 16th parallel as the demarcation line, it would have acquired Huế, with the city of Đà Nẵng becoming the northernmost city of the State of Vietnam. As it turned out, both cities went to the State of Vietnam led by the former emperor, Bảo Đại. He, however, was soon elbowed aside by the anticommunist and America-friendly Ngô Đình Diệm, who transformed the State of Vietnam into the Republic of Vietnam in 1955.

The historical disputes and gray areas of the Geneva Accords mostly revolve around two questions concerning the DRV side. The first is how the top DRV leaders felt about the help received from the Soviet Union and the PRC during the negotiations. The second concerns the overall strategy of the DRV leaders after the accords had been signed. Did Thành and his comrades respect the accords and believe that elections would take place?

With respect to the first question (DRV feelings about Soviet and Chinese help at Geneva), most historians consider the DRV to have been the losers, having been deprived at the negotiating table of territory that they had won on the battlefield. To blame was the “great pressure”⁴³ that Khrushchev and Mao had put on Thành to yield ground in the negotiations. This notion of a bad deal imposed on Thành is supported by retrospective statements of both DRV and PRC leaders. The historian Mari Olsen, for example, notes a 1968 conversation between Mao, Zhou Enlai, and Phạm Văn Đồng during which Mao stated that Thành had not wanted to hold negotiations, that the conference had been Khrushchev's idea, and that the PRC and DRV had made a mistake by attending instead of fighting on.⁴⁴

Khrushchev's retrospective view of the Geneva Accords, produced at roughly the same time as the above conversation, casts the accords in just the opposite light. He depicts the DRV leaders as having been desperate for an armistice, their revolutionary movement on the verge of collapse during the months leading up to the battle at Điện Biên Phủ. Khrushchev's characterization makes the Soviet Union appear to have been good advocates for the DRV at Geneva, helping Thành achieve what he needed:

At a preparatory conference in Moscow, China was represented by Zhou Enlai and Vietnam by President Ho Chi Minh and Prime Minister Pham Van Dong. We jointly worked out our position for the Geneva Conference and looked into the situation existing in Vietnam. The situation was very difficult and painful: The liberation movement was on the verge of collapse, and the guerrilla fighters needed an agreement with us so that the conquests that had been achieved by the Vietnamese people in the fight against the occupation forces could be preserved. Hanoi was in the hands of the French, and the guerrilla fighters could not aspire to retake it. Other cities and provinces were also controlled by the French. . . .

After one of our sessions in Catherine's Hall at the Kremlin, Zhou button-holed me, drew me aside into a corner, and said: "Comrade Ho has told me that their situation is hopeless. If they don't get a ceasefire in the near future, they won't be able to hold out against the French forces. They have therefore decided to retreat to the Chinese border, so that China can move its troops in, as it did earlier in North Korea, and help the Vietnamese people drive the French out of Vietnam."⁴⁵

Khrushchev's description of the situation in the DRV leading up to Điện Biên Phủ and the Geneva Conference seems to be contradicted by the Vietnamese Communist Party's (i.e., the party general secretary Lê Duẩn's) 1979 "White Paper" on relations with the PRC.⁴⁶ This political tract blamed the CCP for the settlement at Geneva, interpreting the PRC's supposedly uninspired advocacy of DRV interests at the conference as an early sign of a Chinese desire to compete with the DRV for influence over Laos and Cambodia.

That interpretation, of course, needs to be seen in the context of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam's (1976 to today) actual battle with the PRC over influence in Indochina at the time, twenty-five years after the Geneva Conference. This struggle had resulted in the short (February 17 to March 16, 1979) but bloody border war between the two countries. At that time, the Soviet Union was Vietnam's key ally against the PRC, so it is not surprising that none of the retrospective blame was placed on the shoulders of the Soviet Union.

Both Pierre Asselin and Christopher Goscha, in recent scholarship dealing with the Geneva Accords, present (from internal VWP documents published in the *Party Documents* series) evidence that supports Khrushchev's characterization.⁴⁷ One of their most important pieces of evidence is a speech that Trường Chinh delivered during a meeting of the party Central Committee held July 15–17, 1954. This was during the final week of the Geneva Conference, when many

of the terms of the accords between the DRV and France were being frantically hammered out before the July 20 deadline.⁴⁸ As Chinh explained to Central Committee members at the meeting:

The more we fight, the stronger we become. The more our enemy fights, the weaker he becomes. After the Điện Biên Phủ campaign, the relative forces between us and the enemy changed in our favor, but they have not yet changed fundamentally. On some battlefields, and to some extent, our side is stronger than the enemy, but speaking of the entire country in general, our strength and the enemy's strength are only more or less similar [*môi xấp xỉ*].⁴⁹

In other words, a roughly equal division of Vietnam between the forces of the French Union and those of the DRV accurately reflected the relative strengths of the two sides in mid-July. Chinh's report to the Central Committee, however, probably also needs to be treated with some skepticism since its purpose, as Goscha notes, was partly to justify the soon-to-be-signed Geneva Accords, to make his comrades see the terms of the accords in a positive light.⁵⁰ At that time, reasons of faith still required that the party leaders depict their Soviet and PRC allies as selfless advocates of the DRV cause—and, following the signing of the Geneva Accords on July 20, the DRV would immediately hail the ceasefire as a great victory for their side.

Attempts to shape public perceptions of the Geneva Accords in a positive way can be found in the DRV's press organs. For example, it is no coincidence that on July 16, only four days before the accords were signed, *The People* provided a timeline "summary" of the major battles and events of the conflict. With the exception of one mention of the DRV forces "liberating" Kontum (the Battle of Yang Mang Pass), located in southern Central Vietnam, all the DRV victories noted on the timeline had occurred in the northern half of the country. The timeline included no mention of any DRV military victories in Cochinchina (not to mention Laos or Cambodia).⁵¹

This may have been a way of suggesting to party members that the soon-to-be-announced partition of the country was based mostly on the reality of how the fighting had gone. The majority of the important battles had been in the North, with the implication being that it was there that the DRV had earned the right to demand real estate. But was a list of key battles really an accurate way of assessing the balance of forces at the end of the war? The French military leaders certainly did not use this standard; their maps indicated the division of the country into regions of political control. The fact that the DRV published

a map of battles rather than a map of political control in *The People* suggests an attempt on their part to make the balance of forces in Vietnam seem more even than it had been.

Another argument, which can be inferred from Goscha's study of Điện Biên Phủ, is that previous scholars have not fully appreciated the extent of the losses suffered by the DRV forces in their effort to win the battle. If the French estimate of 22,000 DRV casualties is roughly correct, it means that the DRV lost the equivalent of more than two divisions' worth of soldiers. This was the positive spin on the French Union defeat that General Navarre and President Eisenhower advanced in the days following the garrison's fall. I tend to agree with Goscha's and Khrushchev's description of the DRV as a victorious but dangerously exhausted fighter with much to gain from the Geneva armistice.

The Period of the 300 Days: 1954–1955

The signing of the Geneva Accords on July 20, 1954 and the release of the conference's "Final Declaration" the following day made the DRV's party leaders the internationally recognized masters of the country's northern half.¹ The "Democratic Republic of Vietnam" had suddenly been transformed from an aspiration into a definite geographic entity reflected in its new, informal name, "North Vietnam." The problem for Nguyễn Tất Thành and his comrades in the Politburo, however, was that their conception of the "Democratic Republic of Vietnam" remained the one of August 1945, which was a polity that encompassed the whole country, not just the territory above the 17th parallel.

The question now was how the party would approach a range of issues related to the war's sudden end. What would be the DRV's official attitude toward the Geneva Accords? What would be the unofficial internal approach? How would the DRV establish control over the northern Vietnamese regions that had been under the control of the French and their Vietnamese ally, the State of Vietnam? How would the central government transition back to city life in Hanoi? What would happen with the land reform campaign now that peace had arrived, especially given the fact that key provisions of the Geneva Accords supposedly protected all Vietnamese people from any sort of state repression?

As stipulated by the Geneva Accords, within 300 days, the French military forces were to evacuate the North and regroup to the South, which would increasingly be referred to as "South Vietnam." Vietnamese political leaders associated with the noncommunist State of Vietnam, whose power had been enabled to a large extent by the French military presence, would be heading south as well. According to the Final Declaration of the Geneva Conference, national elections were to be held in two years' time (July 1956) to unify the country.

Publicly, Thành and his lieutenants promoted the accords as a great victory, propagandized hard for their implementation, and depicted the DRV as strict and earnest adherents of Geneva's terms. Did the public image of adherence,

however, correspond to internal reality? In his classic, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975*, the historian George Herring described Washington and Saigon as using “alleged North Vietnamese truce violations” to justify their rejection of the national elections called for by the Geneva Accords (the key word being “alleged”).² Edwin Moise, in his 1982 account of the DRV land reform, was more circumspect. He pointed out that the party continued, through their land reform campaign, to punish landlords for collaborating with the French, despite having officially dropped the slogan, “Overthrow traitors and reactionaries.” But Moise then wondered why the International Control Commission (ICC), which had been set up to monitor implementation of the accords, and which, according to him, “could move with a fair degree of freedom in North Vietnam,” did not report more violations. “[T]hey should have been aware of any widespread violations of the accords,” Moise argued.³

The period of the “300 days” refers to the time of “free movement” immediately following the signing of the Geneva Accords. All Vietnamese were to be allowed by the governments in both Hanoi and Saigon to move freely north or south across the 17th parallel to live under the regime of their liking. The 300-day period was closely tied to article 14c of the Geneva Accords on “no reprisals,” which strictly forbade either regime from carrying out reprisals against civilians who had supported the opposing side during the war. Because DRV adherence to these two key articles is an important theme of this chapter, it is worth providing the text from the Geneva Accords:

Article 14c: Each party undertakes to refrain from any reprisals or discrimination against persons or organizations on account of their activities during the hostilities and to guarantee their democratic liberties.

Article 14d: From the date of entry into force of the present Agreement until the movement of troops is completed, any civilians residing in a district controlled by one party who wish to go and live in the zone assigned to the other party shall be permitted and helped to do so by the authorities in that district.

The period of the 300 days was originally supposed to conclude on May 18, 1955, but pressure from the ICC forced the DRV leaders to extend the period for two additional months until July 20. According to the scholar Peter Hansen, at least 80,000 Northerners, three quarters of whom were Catholics, emigrated to the South during this period.⁴ Concerned that fear of the land reform might convince even more Northerners to move south, Thành and his lieutenants decided

to adjust aspects of the campaign during the immediate post–Geneva Accords period of the 300 days.

The DRV’s “Implementation” Policy

One of the obvious ways in which the DRV leaders were able to make a case for themselves as conscientious followers of the Geneva Accords was through their official policy of “implementation.”⁵ This meant expressing public support for and faith in the accords, avoiding being flagged for violations, and keeping up a steady and loud press campaign demanding that the anticommunist regime in Saigon meet for talks about holding the general free elections in July 1956. Did Thành and other party leaders believe that elections would take place?

In my view, a slight majority of scholars have tended to agree with the assessment of the historian George Kahin that the DRV leaders “had ample basis” for believing that the July 1956 elections would take place. According to Kahin, that belief stemmed from the fact that elections were “clearly promised” in both the ceasefire agreement between the DRV and France and in the Final Declaration of the accords.⁶ More recently, Pierre Asselin and Mari Olsen have interpreted the DRV’s strong propaganda campaign for implementation of the Geneva Accords as well as internal communications between DRV leaders and their Soviet and Chinese allies discussing the “struggle to implement the Geneva Accords” as indications of a genuine commitment to reunification through peaceful means.⁷

The opposite (and, in my view, more convincing) argument—that the DRV leaders did not expect the elections to take place—is made by scholars such as Victor Bator, Jeffrey Race,⁸ and Ralph Smith. In his *International History of the Vietnam War*, Smith explains that “[i]n the international climate of May 1955 there was every reason to expect—despite the face-saving clauses of the Final Declaration—that the partition of Vietnam would be of indefinite duration.” Smith points to the basic similarity between the partition of Vietnam and the partitions of Germany and Korea, “which had likewise been military in origin and had been accompanied by pious statements about the eventual political reunification.”⁹ In Smith’s estimation, North Vietnam’s diplomatic strategy vis-à-vis the Geneva Accords—pushing hard for elections—“was probably based on the safe assumption that [the South Vietnamese leader] Diem would never agree to consultation and that the bluff would never be called.”¹⁰ Echoing the sentiments of Race and Smith, Ilya Gaiduk, in his 2003 book dealing with Soviet policy toward Vietnam from 1954 to 1963, argues that “nobody believed that the elections themselves would ever take place.”¹¹

During the negotiations, representatives of the non-communist State of Vietnam (soon to become the Republic of Vietnam) and their American backers had made it clear that they rejected any elections not supervised by the United Nations—a condition that was unacceptable to Nguyễn Tất Thành.¹² Moreover, past experience and the Marxist-Leninist ideology of the VWP leaders suggested that inherently greedy imperialist countries and their Vietnamese allies would not yield an inch of ground to the DRV that had not been won on the battlefield. The Soviets basically rejected free elections for Germany, and the same could be said of the PRC with respect to elections for Korea. Therefore, why should France and the United States not act similarly in Vietnam, where the numbers this time were not in their favor? And how could the Soviets and Chinese, after rejecting elections in Germany and Korea, suddenly demand them in Vietnam?

The 6th Plenum of the VWP Central Committee: July 15–17, 1954

Thành and the VWP leaders introduced their new policies and slogans at the 6th Plenum of the Central Committee, held from July 15 to 17, 1954 (during the last week of the Geneva negotiations). He opened the July plenum with a brief report that presented the basic outlines of the party's new policies. In typical fashion, Thành's report began with an assessment of the "world situation." In the eight paragraphs of this section, the proper noun "France" appears nine times, while the proper noun "America" appears thirty-one times. This reflected the report's main assessment: The United States was replacing France as the dominant Western power in Indochina and the main foe of the DRV.

To prepare party members for a surprising about-face in DRV policy, Thành spent the majority of this section describing the "deep and expanding internal contradictions of the American-led imperialist camp" as opposed to the "Vietnamese-Chinese-Soviet camp," which was "very unified." He pointed out differences in the American and British approaches toward the PRC along with American infringements on British interests in Pakistan, New Zealand, and Australia.¹³ As for the United States and France, he highlighted the latter's reluctance to join NATO and the former's efforts to "shove" France aside in Indochina.¹⁴ Suggesting how bizarre his new policy would appear to party members, Thành reminded his audience that the "correctness" of the party's policies in the past was what had enabled their side to achieve the "good results" of today.

The policy about-face for which Thành was preparing his audience was alliance with France. Thành obviously hoped that by reaching out to France and suggesting the possibility of a friendly relationship, he could inspire that country

to resist American incursions in Indochina. The policy might also win over French public opinion to some degree. According to Thành:

In order to resist the direct and long-term intervention of the American imperialists, to resist their expansion of the war in Indochina, we need to firmly grasp the flag of peace. Our policy has changed: before, we confiscated the property of the French imperialists, now, since we have negotiated, following the principle of equality and mutual benefit, we can protect the economic and cultural interests of the French in Indochina. In our way of speaking, we need to compromise with each other to the right extent. Before, we said “attack and liquidate all the French troops.” In the past, we wanted no part of the French Union. Now, because we have spoken with each other, because we have demanded that France remove its troops and they have agreed to do so in steps, we have agreed to discuss the issue of participating in the French Union on an equal and voluntary basis. Before, our policy was to liquidate the puppet army and the puppet administration in order to achieve unity. Now, we will use a gentler policy—we use the means of national elections to unify the country.¹⁵

Toward the end of his report, Thành reaffirmed that “right now, America is the main enemy of the world’s people, and it is becoming the main and direct enemy of the Indochinese people, so all work needs to be aimed against the American imperialists.” To this end, he explained, “any person or country not friendly with America can be in a unified front with us, even if only temporarily.” Apparently, France fell into that category.

In his report, Thành also clarified, through example, the basic language to be used in descriptions of Indochina’s political situation. The important thing was to avoid using the term “anticommunist” or any such conceptual framework suggesting that the United States had become involved in Indochina for ideological rather than materialistic reasons. Similarly, the DRV’s discourse was in no way to reflect the notion that what was at stake in Indochina was a choice between communism and noncommunism for the Vietnamese people.

The Soviet Union, the DRV, and the PRC were not communist countries but rather “democratic” ones. Publicly, the party was not to say that they were implementing communism but rather democracy. The Soviet Union was not the leader of the international Communist movement but of the “world movement for peace and democracy.” Instead of saying that the United States was establishing the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO)¹⁶ to contain the spread of communism, Thành wanted his propaganda organs to state that SEATO

was established “so that Asians could be used [by the United States] to fight Asians.” America was not the enemy of the Communist bloc; it was the “enemy of world peace.” And America’s refusal to sign the Geneva Accords had nothing to do with anticommunism—it was an effort to “sabotage peace.”¹⁷ The point was to keep the contentious issue of communism out of the public discourse as much as possible.

Members of the Central Committee attending the meeting might have wondered whether Thành’s sudden gesture of warmth and reconciliation with the French would affect the DRV’s treatment of alleged “traitors,” “landlords,” “spies,” and “saboteurs” targeted in the land reform. Would Thành’s public stress on a “gentler policy” for national reunification translate to a “gentler” approach to the party’s alleged internal enemies in North Vietnam? This was not to be the case. Thành, Trường Chinh, Phạm Văn Đồng, and other top party leaders might court French friendship on the international diplomatic plane, but in the villages of North Vietnam, through the vehicle of the land reform, the repression of actual and imagined opponents of the DRV regime would continue as before, though with a few superficial adjustments.¹⁸

The Secret Politburo Meeting of September 5–7, 1954

It appears from the party’s internal documents that, at some point in early August, Thành and the Politburo began to realize how disastrous the “free movement” clause of the Geneva Accords could be for the DRV’s image and for the party’s implementation discourse. By the end of the month, about 60,000 people had left by airplane and another 80,000 by boat, with tens of thousands still awaiting passage.¹⁹ The picture of hundreds of thousands of North Vietnamese civilians abandoning their ancestral villages to start a new life in the South undermined the DRV leadership’s public insistence that the partition of the country was only temporary. It also showed that the real Vietnamese nation, as opposed to the imagined one promoted by the party, was not unified. The question of communism versus noncommunism did matter.

On September 1, 1954, the ICC sent the DRV representative a communiqué demanding that the regime publicize to all inhabitants of North Vietnam the fact that the Geneva Accords guaranteed basic democratic freedoms for all Vietnamese, that all people had the right to move freely between the two halves of the country, and that nobody was to suffer state-sponsored retribution for any acts committed during the war.²⁰ The party leaders printed this announcement in the September 9, 1954 issue of their main newspaper, *The People*. This ICC

communiqué seems to have set off alarm bells for Thành and perhaps was part of the motivation for calling a secret, three-day Politburo meeting four days later from September 5 to 7. It is likely that the letter from the ICC warned the DRV leaders of evidence that they were violating the Geneva Accords in some way related to the “free movement” clause.

Curbing the Emigration

The three-day Politburo meeting in early September appears to have covered a number of strategic issues related to Vietnam’s complicated post-Geneva situation. First and foremost was the emigration. In a directive from the Party Secretariat, released on September 5, 1954, Trường Chinh spoke with great concern about the intention of the new South Vietnamese leader, Ngô Đình Diệm, along with the French and the Americans, to encourage the emigration to the South of 500,000 to 1 million Northerners. According to Chinh, these were mostly “puppet soldiers and their families along with Catholics, youths, civil servants, teachers, intellectuals, professionals, etc.” As he explained, “In order to implement the above scheme, they use Machiavellian propaganda such as: if you go to the South you will be happy, if you stay you will be terrorized, you will suffer retribution, you will not have religious freedom, etc.” Chinh remarked that, by the end of August, about 60,000 people had emigrated to the South—apparently a significant underestimation of the actual number, which, according to the historian John Prados, was closer to 100,000.²¹ Though DRV propaganda had been somewhat effective in convincing “puppet soldiers” not to emigrate, “basically,” Chinh wrote, “we have not yet broken up the enemy’s plan.”²²

Since the use of propaganda was not going to be enough to prevent people from leaving, a more direct physical intervention from the DRV apparatus would be required. To make these interventions seem not to violate the Geneva Accords, the party leaders created a semantic template that turned efforts to prevent people from leaving into efforts to uphold the accords. The template would deny all agency on the part of the émigrés. No peasants would leave the DRV on their own volition; all had been “forced and enticed” (*bắt ép và dụ dỗ*) into such a bold action. In this way, efforts by the regime to prevent Northerners from leaving could be depicted as altruistic rescue attempts. As is well known, the United States and the Diệm regime did carry out a propaganda campaign to encourage (or scare) people into leaving, but, as Peter Hansen has recently argued, that campaign probably reached and affected only a tiny fraction of the people who left.²³

An interesting question is why, considering the party's professed obsession with "landlords," "internal enemies," "saboteurs," "traitors," "reactionaries," "spies," and so on, the Politburo did not welcome the departure from the DRV of people who had reservations about the regime? This would have been a much easier and less expensive way to "purify" (*làm trong sạch*) the population. To the party rank-and-file, Chinh explained:

We must recognize that the task of wrecking the enemy's scheme of forcing compatriots to go South is a tense and urgent political struggle mainly for the purpose of angling for the masses to stay in their home regions, in their villages, to participate in the work of building the country and not being forced by the enemy to serve as soldiers or as plantation coolies where they would be full of misery and hardship. If the enemy succeeded in their scheme, it would be disadvantageous for us politically. They would be able to fool both world and domestic opinion by claiming that Vietnamese went to the South because our regime is not good, creating disadvantages for us in the subsequent free elections. Moreover, [the emigration of large numbers of people to the South] would also lead directly to difficulties for us in our task of assuming control over and managing the cities as well as in the task of building the country.²⁴

Chinh chided rank-and-file party members for not recognizing the importance of this "grave and Machiavellian ruse" of the enemy. He complained that DRV propaganda aimed at curbing the emigration had not "gone deep enough."

Yet within Chinh's directive, when discussing how "puppet soldiers" should be handled to prevent their emigration, the general secretary still inserted a time-qualifier to signal that today's leniency was only a temporary tactical measure:

Suspend the forcing of puppet soldiers to carry out "confessions"; do not investigate them for documents and crimes. Call for puppet soldiers to turn in their weapons, but do not force them to do so. With the exception of those puppet soldiers who are zealously carrying out counterrevolutionary activities, now, on a temporary basis, we should not try puppet soldiers who committed crimes, and we should not mobilize the masses to denounce their crimes. We should explain clearly our puppet-soldier policy to the masses at this time; we only punish those who are zealously carrying out sabotage. When accepting those puppet soldiers who, here and there, had deserted, we can educate them appropriately—we should not "open up a re-education class."²⁵

The directive also provided instructions on how to handle Catholic communities, which had had a difficult relationship with the regime and were the most likely to leave en masse for the South. Chinh stated that in areas containing large concentrations of Catholics, such as Bùì Chú and Phát Diêm, the mass mobilization for rent reduction and land reform should be “temporarily put off.” And, to the extent that local resources permitted, Chinh advised cadres to provide Catholics with production loans, aid, and medical treatment.

On the propaganda front, the directive ordered cadres to “mobilize those people who had been forced [to emigrate] but had then subsequently escaped back [to North Vietnam]. Their experience should be used to make Catholics see the enemy’s trick.”²⁶ Obviously, bureaucrats and teachers who had worked for the Bảo Đại regime were another segment of the population likely to emigrate. To convince them to stay, Chinh stated that they were to be promised the same salary that they had received under the Bảo Đại regime.²⁷

Refinements to the VWP’s Strategy for the South

On the second day of the September 5–7 Politburo meeting, Chinh released another directive. It clarified the party’s overall strategy for gaining political control over the South or “unifying the country,” as they were careful to phrase it. The party leaders were intent on repeating the basic tactics that had brought them success in the recent war against the French and their anticommunist Vietnamese allies, the State of Vietnam. While DRV land-reform teams were methodically purging elites from local political organizations in the Northern countryside, the regime would advertise itself to the Southern population and the world as the ally of all patriotic Vietnamese willing to combat or, at least, not support, the Ngô Đình Diệm regime and its American backers in Saigon.

With slogans of peace, unity, independence, and democracy, along with a people’s united front that has a truly broad character, we can win over a large segment of the popular masses. We can gain influence over and win the sympathy of a broad segment of society. We can make the French and their puppets unable not to respect the Ceasefire Agreement, unable not to recognize people’s democratic freedoms, and unable not to accept the unification of the country by free election. [We must] avoid slogans and forms of mobilization that are too far to the left [*quá cao*], and avoid giving off a tense oppositional attitude. We must make members of the higher classes and many people working for the puppet regime see that after the country

is unified, they will not just have a means of surviving but will actually be able to maintain their given position in society.²⁸

Following through with this promise to elites in the Ngô Đình Diệm government would have meant renouncing Marxist-Leninist principles of class warfare and the principle of revenge that was then supposed to be animating the land reform. Thus, there was a danger, perhaps not fully appreciated by Thành and Chinh, that prescriptions designed for winning over the South would take some of the revolutionary sting out of the land reform.

What would land reform cadres think, for example, when they learned about the class composition of the DRV's new front organization, the "United People's Front"? As Chinh explained:

The front needs to be truly broad, but it needs have as its basis the worker-peasant alliance, and it must be under the leadership of the working class (this point is not essential to put forward in the front's new Political Platform and Regulations).

The composition of the Front will include the working class, the peasant class, the petit-bourgeoisie, the national bourgeoisie, and patriotic notables. The Front can even attract those elements of the comprador bourgeoisie and the landlord class who support peace, unity, independence, and democracy while at the same time resolutely struggle against those who are pro-American, who sow divisions [among the people], and who are stubborn.²⁹

The new front for the South was to attract members of the landlord class just as the old Vietminh and its replacement organization, the United Vietnam Association, had done. It must have seemed strange for land reform cadres to see that, while they were organizing the public trials and executions of alleged landlords, the slogan to be applied in the South for "puppet soldiers" was "Vietnamese people should not shoot Vietnamese people."³⁰

In addition to the two directives, the secret meeting of the Politburo from September 5 to 7 also resulted in a broader resolution that summarized the major aspects of the current situation. "Our people's task of national liberation has not yet been completed; the patriotic struggle has not stopped just because of the ceasefire." Indeed, as the resolution affirmed, the "struggle continues," though it would be carried out with "different methods." The impact of the struggle over the South meant, as the resolution explained, that the VWP would need to be more discreet in its outward revolutionary appearances:

Generally speaking, the DRV's policies as compared with those of the PRC, when it first began the construction of its country in 1949, must be a little more conciliatory, with the class composition of the government a little broader, the speed of development of policies a little slower. Our political regime, in its content is a people's democracy, but in its form, to some extent, must still use old democracy. Only in this way is [our government] appropriate for the current situation in our country, and only in this way is it easy for us to unite the whole people of the nation, to have a good influence on the South, and to create favorable conditions for the unification of our country.³¹

These calls for "moderate" appearances, the maintenance of vigilance before the threat of an image-tarnishing large-scale emigration of Northerners to the South, and the preservation of the regime's image as implementers of the Geneva Accords, meant that some other adjustments needed to be made to the land reform campaign. From a geographic perspective, the areas of greatest concern were those close to the port city of Haiphong. This was to be the last area controlled by the French and the major departure point for Northern émigrés heading to the South.

For regions of the northern countryside that had been under French control until the end of the war (estimated by the party to contain about two million people),³² the Politburo Resolution stated that "for at least one year (that is, before we take control over Haiphong), we should not carry out land reform, but in recently liberated places in the countryside that are far from Haiphong, we can carry out mass mobilization for rent reduction . . . to prepare for land reform later." The resolution also stated that, in those recently recovered parts of the countryside, the issue of the party purge should not be mentioned "too soon." Thus, the threat of the emigration directly impacted the structure of the land reform campaign. The Politburo's policy was to keep the land reform away from places where people had a relatively easy escape route to Haiphong and the South.³³ Again, the fear of losing targets for the campaign is apparent.

Toning Down the Land Reform Propaganda

In addition to these geographical implications, the post-Geneva situation had implications for the way the campaign was to be propagandized. The party leaders understandably instructed the editors of their main newspapers to avoid direct references to the killing of landlords and, generally speaking, to lower the

profile of the campaign. This meant fewer and less sensational articles about the land reform for a period to avoid providing the enemy with evidence of Geneva Accords violations. An examination of the coverage of the campaign in *The People* shows what appears to be the point at which the new propaganda strategy went into effect. An article titled, “The Results of the Four Waves of Mass Mobilization through Rent Reduction,” which was published in *The People* three weeks before the September Politburo meeting, began as follows:

In the four recent waves, mass mobilization for rent reduction was carried out in 631 subdistricts belonging to 14 provinces: Thái-nguyên, Phú-thọ, Tuyên-quang, Bắc-giang, Cao-bằng, Lạng-sơn, Bắc-cạn, Vĩnh-phúc, Yên-bái, Thanh-hóa, Nghệ-an, Hà-tĩnh, Ninh-bình, Hòa-bình.

Including the 195 subdistricts of wave 5 [currently undergoing the campaign], mass mobilization through rent reduction will have been carried out in 826 subdistricts. This means that we have mobilized 64% of the subdistricts in the old free zone in accordance with our original plan.

The population of these mobilized subdistricts is 3,479,545 people (the population in the subdistricts undergoing mobilization in wave 5 in Cao-Bắc-Lạng [Cao Bằng, Bắc Cạn, and Lạng Sơn provinces] have not yet been counted). The total population of the 14 provinces is 5,733,429.

Peasants struggled against 1,215 landlords (not yet including wave 4 in Thanh Hóa). The total number of landlord families during the 4 waves was 10, 147 people.³⁴

Two days after the September 5–7 Politburo Meeting, *The People* published an article of similar character, reporting the results of the first wave of land reform, when the attack on the landlord class was supposed to be stronger than during the rent reduction phase:

Wave 1 of the Land Reform in the Vietnamese North Interzone Has Concluded

The land reform work teams in 47 subdistricts of the three districts: Phú-Bình, Đông-hỷ, Đại-từ (Thái Nguyên province) have completed wave one of their work task. Now, the teams are reconvening to carry out a debriefing meeting.

Below are the results of the division of land, buffalos, and agricultural tools in the focal commune of Phúc-xuân, Đông-hỷ district:

Land:

57 landless peasant families (162 total people) received 49 *mẫu* 4 *sào* 4 *thước* [of land], with the average person after land reform having 3 *sào* 10 *thước*.

136 poor peasant families (563 total people) received 132

Buffalos, agricultural tools:

53 buffalos were distributed to 87 poor and landless peasants, 15 [buffalos] were distributed to three middle-peasant families. 45 landless peasants and 94 poor peasants received 146 plows.³⁵

The second article makes no mention of “struggles” against landlords, and, indeed, the word “landlord” does not appear. We hear of land, buffalos, and farm tools being distributed, but nothing of how the land reform team in the subdistrict had come into possession of these things.

Fear of being flagged for Geneva Accords violations also inspired the party leaders to change some of the slogans and terms used during the campaign. As the Politburo Resolution stated, “the Geneva Accords and the task of unifying the country compel us to change a few things in the Land Reform Law and in our method of implementing that law.” The policy of “confiscating” the land of the “French colonialists” and either “confiscating” or “requisitioning” the land and belongings of “Vietnamese traitors” as stated in the Land Reform Law was to be softened to “French plantation owners” and “those Vietnamese landlords who cooperated with the adversary (*đôi phương*).” The words “confiscate” and “requisition” would be changed to “compulsory purchase” (*trung mua*).

Preventing the Loss of Struggle Targets

The Geneva Accords compelled other cosmetic changes in the land reform that were discussed at the secret Politburo meeting:

The method of struggling against landlords in the mass mobilization has changed somewhat. Now we must stress the importance of legal authority and use judicial forms to deal with landlord resistance. With respect to satisfying the basic demands of the peasants and creating political power for the peasants in the countryside, the direct actions of peasants struggling against landlords must be more flexible now. This is to avoid giving our opponents a pretext for claiming that we are terrorizing those who cooperated with them. At the same time, we need to avoid a situation in

which landlords who are being struggled against flee to the South in great numbers, hurting our efforts to unify the country.³⁶

Finally, the Politburo decided that the threat of emigration compelled them to “reconsider” the land reform from a chronological perspective. How much time should be devoted to carrying out the mass mobilization in the areas controlled by the DRV during the war?

If class relations are too tense and the time of that tenseness carries on too long, it will not be advantageous for the effort to consolidate the peace, restore production, and restore construction of the economy. Therefore, we need to shorten the time for the land reform, eliminating those tasks that can be eliminated, and reducing those demands that can be reduced. We need to shorten the time of each mass mobilization wave, prepare enough cadres, and devise a concrete plan that allows us to complete the mass mobilization in our region (excluding ethnic minority areas) within about two years.³⁷

Here was a different explanation for the rush to complete the campaign (we saw before the alleged need to complete the campaign before the elections). It is unclear what Chinh actually meant by class relations being “too tense,” but it appears to have been an attempt to convince rank-and-file party members that peasant demands for an attack on the landlord class had reached such high levels of intensity that the land reform needed to be carried out as quickly as possible.

This seems to be another case of Chinh feeling compelled to depict an arbitrary decision by the party leaders as stemming from actual conditions on the ground. It does not seem logical, in the same report, to express fears of landlord departures to the South and then also claim that class relations in the countryside were intensifying. If anything, the departure of large numbers of landlords would ease whatever “class tensions” allegedly existed in communities at the time. And subsequent complaints by the party leaders that the campaign was running out of steam, with cadres committing “rightist errors,” suggests that the gulf between the actual situation on the ground and the party’s land reform narrative was widening, not narrowing.

The Politburo resolution acknowledged that these changes were “naturally” going to have some influence on the mass mobilization—but, for the above reasons, they still needed to be implemented. However, it was important to make cadres and peasants understand that, despite these changes, “our land policy

basically has not changed; the aspects [of the policy] that have changed are all secondary and contingent.”³⁸

Further Adjustments to the Land Reform Program

The tinkering with the land reform by Thành and Chinh to avoid being flagged for Geneva Accords violations continued. Providing clarification on some of the adjustments to the campaign, Chinh announced in a November 3, 1954 directive that, “from now on,” the land reform would no longer carry out “struggle sessions” organized and led by the Peasant Association. Now, the district-level or interdistrict-level “special people’s courts” would simply set up and “guide” the trials of “cruel and despotic landlords.” These trials would be combined with peasant “denunciations” of the accused landlords, so the spirit of the old “denunciation sessions” was preserved. Chinh explained how the process would work:

After having mobilized the thinking of the masses, organized the peasant forces, collected enough crimes of the landlord, prepared enough witnesses and evidence, and established a case file for the cruel and despotic landlord, [cadres] should immediately begin a trial of the landlord combined with peasant denunciations in order to satisfy in a timely manner the peasants’ demands for struggle. If we are too slow to try the case, it will reduce the mass’s will to struggle. It will also negatively impact our struggle on the economic front.

Therefore, the Case Assessment Bureau [*Ban xét trí*] at all levels needs to approve the cases in a timely manner. Any subdistrict whose cases have been approved by the upper-level needs to *immediately set up a court and try the case*. Any subdistrict that has not yet received upper-level approval of its case should not wait for that approval before beginning the trial. All that is needed is *higher-ups to prepare the list of landlords who need to be tried in the special people’s court* (in other words, the list of cruel and despotic landlord ringleaders for the rent reduction and the list of cruel and despotic landlords for the land reform). The special people’s court can immediately set up public trials at which the masses can denounce the landlords’ crimes. During those public trials, the court should not announce a verdict but wait until after higher-ups have approved the case. At that point, [official] trials can be held in each subdistrict or for a group of subdistricts where the verdicts can be announced.³⁹

Again, the “verdict” of the case was decided not by the people on hand carrying out the trial but by “higher-ups.” Moreover, the second trials, which were to be held after the initial “public trials,” were apparently to take place after the verdicts had already been decided. There were other proposed measures to speed up the land reform’s judicial process:

In those places where the movement is expanded broadly, the district-level or inter-district level special people’s court will not be able to travel to many different places to hold many different trials at the same time. Therefore, a court session needs to be held in every subdistrict. If there are not enough juridical cadres for the establishment of these courts, then juridical cadres need only be used in places holding the most important trials or in those places near cities where we need to create a good political influence among the various classes of people. As for the other places, the Land Reform Brigade leaders can select a land reform team leader or vice-leader to act as judge for the district-level special people’s court and act as a *tribunal president* [chánh án phiên tòa]. So that each trial brings good results, Land Reform Brigade leaders must coach and share experiences with the leaders and vice-leaders of land reform teams.⁴⁰

Concluding the directive, Chinh instructed that it was only to be sent to Land Reform Brigade leaders and provincial party leaders, who would relay its content “by word of mouth” to the leaders and vice-leaders of land reform teams.

Handling the ICC

As noted above, the September 5–7, 1954 meeting of the Politburo appears to mark a turning point in how the party leaders saw the situation in the DRV, especially the danger posed by the possible emigration of large numbers of people to the South and the troubles that could be created by the ICC if its inspection groups were not carefully monitored. A September 26, 1954 directive from the Party Secretariat discussed how local party members should prepare in the case of an ICC visit.

Frequently the Control Commission will visit locations to inspect and investigate. Aside from investigating specific issues, they will try to find a way to figure out all aspects of our general situation. They could go to a place and start asking the locals questions, etc. Therefore, we need to prepare and let those local people know how to respond cleverly to the

International Control Commission's questions; we cannot just let them say whatever they want.⁴¹

In November 1954, a month after the regime had moved back to Hanoi, their worst-case emigration scenario began to look increasingly possible. The DRV leaders were furious with what they saw as the weak and passive response to the emigration by party leaders in the provinces. Estimates in Zone III (provinces of Nam Định, Ninh Bình, Hòa Bình, Thái Bình, etc.) were that about one quarter of that region's large Catholic population had already left and that an "important part" of the remaining three quarters was preparing to follow suit:

There are regions such as Gia Viễn, Nho Quan, or different localities in Thanh Hóa [province] that underwent mass mobilization. Previously, the masses there struggled and denounced with great enthusiasm, but now they also are leaving—even the "roots" and "beads" [from the mass mobilization] leave. There are places where, before leaving, our countrymen salute the flag, leave behind some money to pay off debts to the bank, and write goodbye letters to cadres. Generally speaking, the Catholic masses have been wickedly tricked, enticed, and forced [into emigrating].⁴²

According to Trường Chinh, the "scheme" used by the "puppet enemy" had four basic components. The first was "tricking and hypnotizing Catholics" by saying such things as "God has gone to the South already" or by saying that "the communists will ban their religion, will destroy Catholics, or will put them all in prison for following the French." The second method was "distorting the Party and Government's policies," claiming, for example, that the agricultural tax and the industrial tax would be "very heavy" and that they would "starve to death" if they stayed. On the other hand, if they went to the South, they would receive American aid. The third was to "use armed force or the prestige of the church in order to compel [Catholics to emigrate]." The fourth method was to "disseminate nonsensical rumors," making people think that life in the North was "unstable" and yearn for a new life in the South, which they imagined as "quieter and more stable."⁴³

The party leaders' assessments of Catholics in particular and of the countryside in general paid little attention to the question of how the regime's policies might have generated receptivity among Catholics to these alleged "ruses" for convincing them to emigrate. Once again, the explanation stressed the implementation of the party's policies rather than the policies themselves. "According to the assessment of the Central Committee, the dangerous situation described

above is not the result of the masses not being good, and it is also not the result of the party's policies lacking clarity." The problem, explained Chinh, was that "our cadres had rightist deviation thinking," which meant that they thought fighting against the "reactionaries" who "forced" Catholics to emigrate would be tantamount to violating the Geneva Accords. Cadres had also committed "deviations" in implementing the party's religious policy, and "many cadres" were guilty of "not following the mass line correctly."⁴⁴

Chinh suggested a number of methods for fighting against the emigration. First of all, on the propaganda front, cadres were to try harder to convince Catholics that the DRV regime would respect religious freedom, even making efforts to repair churches that had been damaged during the war or that had been abandoned because of the departure of priest and parishioners. Second, he called for efforts to infiltrate and sow divisions among Catholic priests. Third was to use trials and punishments as a means of intimidating priests so that they would stop calling for Catholics to go south:

[Cadres] need to collect enough evidence and then punish some of the reactionary ringleaders, accusing them before the masses in order to warn others. [Cadres] need to make sure that, when accusing [these ringleaders], they must be convicted of violating the ceasefire agreement and violating the people's democratic freedoms, such as catching the people, confining them in one place, and sending them away without asking the permission of our government, etc.⁴⁵

The party leaders wished to dissolve holding areas (such as churches) where Catholics waiting to emigrate had congregated. Chinh suggested that cadres mobilize people in the vicinity of that staging area to "send petitions" to the DRV government, demanding that it intervene on behalf of those who were being "forcibly detained" for emigration. Evidently these petitions could then be shown to the ICC if it accused the DRV of preventing people from leaving. Indeed, Chinh instructed cadres that, in places where the ICC had scheduled an inspection, they should mobilize people to send similar petitions to the ICC, demanding that it "intervene" for family members who had been "forcibly detained."⁴⁶

A few weeks after goading cadres into being more aggressive in their efforts to prevent Northerners from emigrating, the party leaders organized a "public meeting" in Hanoi's opera house to stage an official protest against violations of the Geneva Accords by Ngô Đình Diệm and his American backers. The content and structure of the meeting was determined by the party leaders, but the

meeting itself was run by noncommunist public personalities connected with the United Vietnam Association and the DRV's Committee for the Protection of World Peace.⁴⁷ Chinh followed up the November 23 public meeting three days later with a Politburo directive titled, "On Creating a Large and Powerful Movement Comprising All Classes of the Entire Country for the Purpose of Resisting our Opponent's Blatant Violations of the Geneva Accords." Toward the end of that directive, Chinh affirmed that, "We have many advantages. Because justice is on our side and because we respect the Geneva Accords, legitimate public opinion supports us."⁴⁸

The internal directives of the Party leaders show increasing frustration at their inability to stop the emigration and a growing willingness to take bolder and riskier measures to stem the flow of people. A February 16, 1955 Politburo directive (about three months before the 300-day period was supposed to end) warned that a large number of people were still preparing to go south. To help this situation, the Politburo recommended the following course of action:

- Choose a few model places where we will organize to help people emigrate (after choosing the place, check it with the Central Committee). We should invite the International Control Commission to come and witness what we do there. These model places must be areas where we have a mass base so that when we organize to help people leave, only a few people actually ask to go. This is the only way that helps our cause. This work must be carefully planned so that it can be implemented rapidly.
- We must have a plan to crush reactionaries, to increase vigilance, to tighten our control, and to prevent the enemy from exploiting this opportunity to speed up concentration of the masses and create more troubles for us.⁴⁹

A month later, on March 20, 1955 (two months before the end of the free-travel period) a communiqué from the VWP Central Committee to the various inter-zones assessed the situation:

The reactionaries in the International Control Commission group are operating zealously. Now they have formed three more groups to inspect coastal provinces: Thái Bình, Nam Định, Ninh Bình, Thanh Hóa, Nghệ An, and Hà Tĩnh. The goal of the reactionaries on the International Control Commission this time is to find our weak spots, find evidence to conclude that we have violated the Accords and bring that before the nine signatories [at Geneva]. They want to delay their departure from Haiphong and lengthen the period of emigration. They want to ruin the Accords and

immediately organize a means of forcing the masses to emigrate on a large scale all at one time.⁵⁰

On that same day, the National Assembly convened for the first time since meeting sixteen months earlier to “approve” the party’s land reform law. At the meeting, Phạm Văn Đồng and Võ Nguyên Giáp both delivered long reports touting the DRV’s “absolute” (*triệt đê*) adherence to the Geneva Accords and condemning the many violations of the accords committed by the “opposition” regime in Saigon.

Reinvigorating the Land Reform, 1955–1956

With the French gone, the threat of the Geneva Accords' 300-day period of free movement over, and the doors out of North Vietnam officially shut, the DRV's party leaders quickly raised the mass mobilization campaign's profile again. A little over a year remained before the regime's self-imposed deadline of June 1956. The party had only carried out land reform in about 735 of the 3,314 subdistricts slated for the campaign. This amounted to less than two million of North Vietnam's roughly ten million rural inhabitants. In other words, the party leaders had about one year to put roughly eight million people through the land reform.¹

Between the official end of the 300 days of free movement in late May of 1955 (the period ended up being extended for two months) and the 7th Plenum of the party Central Committee, scheduled for the middle of August, Nguyễn Tất Thành took the opportunity to visit Beijing and Moscow for the first time as "President Hồ Chí Minh," leader of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. This time, the Soviet leadership rolled out the red carpet—every single member of the CPSU Presidium waited on the Moscow airport tarmac for "Comrade Din's" arrival. According to Ilya Gaiduk, however, this "splendid" reception was meant to compensate for the reluctance of the Soviet leaders to make any similarly splendid military or economic commitments to the DRV.

Through negotiations with his hosts, Thành was able to secure for the DRV 400 million rubles in economic aid, promises that Soviet technical advisers would be sent to Vietnam, and scholarships for DRV students at Soviet universities. But, as Gaiduk points out, this was "nothing like" the Sino-Soviet treaty of 1950 that Thành had coveted back then. The Soviet leadership still preferred that the DRV work primarily under the direct guidance of the Chinese, particularly in military matters.²

A few weeks before the Moscow visit, in a meeting with the Soviet ambassador to the DRV, Thành had apparently raised the issue of whether it would be expedient to have Võ Nguyên Giáp join the delegation so that he could meet

with Soviet military leaders. This suggestion had been declined. As a letter from the Soviet military's general staff to the Soviet Foreign Ministry had explained: "the Vietnamese comrades could at any time receive necessary consultation from us through the command of the People's Liberation Army of China as it is practicing in the present time."³

Thus, Thành did not include Giáp in the delegation, but he did bring Trường Chinh, the party general secretary. This appears to have been Chinh's first time outside of northern Vietnam. During their month of travel together, Thành and Chinh would have had ample time together to discuss the situation back home. The top party leaders were apparently frustrated with how the land reform was proceeding, arguing that "rightist deviations" (i.e., being too soft on the landlord class) had become all too common. In their thinking, the arrival of peace and the chaos of the Geneva Accords had affected the mentality of the mass mobilization apparatus, taking the sting out of the campaign.

The Fight against "Rightist Deviations" in the Land Reform

Looking back over the past four months, Thành and Chinh could count at least four measures taken to ensure that those serving in the land reform apparatus, currently 21,679 cadres, would make the campaign achieve the mass mobilization's unspecified "required goals." First, in February of 1955, the party leaders had expanded the party "reorganization" up the rungs of power from the subdistrict to the district level. Such an upward expansion of the purge raised the stakes for those district-level party members considering whether to "stick their necks out" to save subdistrict-level members targeted in the land reform.⁴

Second, at the 7th Central Committee Plenum in March of 1955, the party leaders had apparently held discussions with Central Committee members who were concerned about "leftist deviations" (i.e., too much violence in the attack on the landlord class) during the land reform. In the eyes of the party leaders, it was "rightist deviations" that were the far greater threat. According to the "Discussion" document produced at the end of the 7th Plenum, Thành and Chinh seem to have fallen back on the Leninist principle of party discipline to enforce their view of the situation.⁵

The apparent discord between the top party leaders and regular Central Committee members suggests the possibility that the true nature and goals of the mass mobilization campaign was a secret of the Politburo not shared with second-tier party leaders. It is possible that Central Committee members questioned the plausibility of the party leadership's estimation of the "enemy." The mass mobilization campaign was now nearly two years old—this was plenty of

time for rumors about the “struggle sessions,” the execution of landlords, and the ferreting out of Nationalist Party cells to spread among the northern population. By March of 1955, local elites and actual Nationalist Party members who thought themselves possible targets of the campaign had had eight months to leave for the South. Second-tier Central Committee members might have wondered why the Politburo had not adjusted its estimate of the enemy to account for this reality.

Third, in early June 1955, the party Secretariat had released a resolution dealing with “Organization Work.” It called for the party reorganization to be expanded upward yet again. Now provincial-level party organizations were to be targeted. As the resolution explained:

Through the land reform and the reorganization of district-level [party branches], it has become apparent that provincial-level [party branches] are still complicated. A number of provincial-level offices continue to be dominated by bad elements, which has hindered the implementation of the Party and Government’s policies. Therefore, immediately after the completion of land reform in a province, that province’s [Party leadership] should be reorganized. The reorganization of provincial-level Party branches will be carried out directly by the Central Committee.⁶

This announcement surely gave provincial party leaders pause as they considered how to handle the land reform in their province. Who would dare act in a way that could be construed as having “hindered” the mass mobilization campaign?

Fourth, the party leaders had pushed to tie promotions and demotions more strongly to performance during the land reform:

The mass mobilization is a good opportunity to understand more clearly the substance of every cadre, which helps the Party’s leading organs promote and use cadres in a more correct and close manner. Currently, in our anti-feudal front, we have a very large force of cadres participating. That provides an extremely convenient occasion to promote and discipline cadres in order to reorganize their ranks. During the land reform, discipline and promotion can be carried out not only with a number of cadres participating in the mass mobilization but also, to a certain extent, with cadres who have not yet participated in the campaign. With respect to these cadres, discipline and promotion can be based on both their attitude toward the mass mobilization and on the materials discovered [about them] by the masses.⁷

As the resolution stated, “any cadres who, despite having been educated about the land reform, continue to refuse service as cadres, should be punished

appropriately.” Similarly, the party leaders wanted performance in the land reform to have a more direct impact on a cadre’s professional status after his return from the campaign. A cadre who had been disciplined during the land reform should not return to his job and be kept in the same position, much less promoted.⁸

Further Radicalization after Thành and Chỉnh’s Return from the Soviet bloc

Thành and Chỉnh returned from their trip overseas on July 23, 1955 with about three weeks to prepare for the Central Committee’s 8th Plenum, scheduled for the middle of August. What they heard and read apparently convinced them that the above measures had been insufficient to curb the trend toward “rightist deviations” in the land reform. At the plenum, they announced the mass mobilization campaign’s third phase, “Reinspection” (*phiếu tra*). As Chỉnh explained in his report:

Our Party organization and leadership is not yet appropriate to the level and demand of the masses and cadres after land reform. In the countryside today, the organization still has many levels and the division of work is not yet clear, with many cadres having overlapping responsibilities. There are places where the Party organization is not yet pure, where there is a lack of unity between new and old members of the Party branch, where the branch leadership is in a state of confusion. The district-level Party branches have been consolidated, but are still green, while zone and provincial-level leaders have not yet improved their leadership in places that have carried out land reform. They are still heavy on formalistic meetings; they have not yet fully grasped the situation; and they do not yet see clearly the difficulties of those below them. Many upper-level cadres have misperceptions about areas that have already gone through land reform. Either they believe that, after land reform, everything is fine and no more problems exist, or, seeing difficulties, they become pessimistic, thinking that the land reform has “gone nowhere.”

The situation described above has presented us with a task—*we must consolidate those places that have undergone land reform*. Therefore, we must organize the reinspection of the countryside. The Central Land Reform Committee must prepare a policy, a plan, and cadres in order to inspect communes that have gone through land reform. This is to help

peasants solve remaining problems, fix weak points and mistakes, and organize peasants to engage in production correctly according to the Party's principles and guidelines.⁹

The reinspection wave was based on Chinese Communist models and had surely been a part of the DRV's three-stage mass mobilization plan (rent reduction, land reform, reinspection) from the beginning.¹⁰

The concept of reinspection was vague enough to be infused with different meanings. One possibility was to reinspect regions discreetly, making no effort to use the findings to influence implementation of the campaign's two preceding phases, rent reduction and land reform. A second possibility was to publicize the results of the reinspection as a means of moderating the implementation of the earlier two phases. In taking this option, the party leaders could announce that reinspection had revealed too aggressive an attack on landlords. A third option was to propagandize the results of the reinspection in a manner that pressured land-reform phase cadres to find more targets for repression. This was the option taken by Thành, Chinh, and the Politburo.

Following the land reform phase's fourth wave, carried out roughly during the latter half of 1955, Thành and Chinh made another move to ensure that the mass mobilization apparatus found the required number of targets for repression. A January 27, 1956 directive written by Nguyễn Duy Trinh on behalf of the party Secretariat stated that “[d]uring wave 8 of the rent reduction and wave 4 of the land reform, the brigade leaders all had to carry out a thorough self-criticism because they saw that they were still disregarding the work of reorganizing Party branches. That is a major weakness that needs to be addressed.”¹¹ According to the directive, “brigade leaders and cadres had not probed deeply to grasp firmly the special situation of [local Party] branches.” These mass mobilization leaders “had not fully recognized the wicked and sophisticated schemes of the landlord class and their reactionary political organizations that dominate party branches.”¹²

The Media Campaign

The Politburo also used a rigorous press campaign to reinforce these efforts at intimidating the mass mobilization apparatus into finding more targets. DRV newspapers released a steady stream of articles insisting that rural North Vietnam remained full of evil landlords, saboteurs, spies, Nationalist Party members, traitors, and landlord sympathizers. All were alleged to be working in concert

toward the collective goal of destroying the revolution. The party's main vehicles for the promotion of this narrative were the Central Committee organ, *The People*, and the recently established theoretical journal, *Study* (December 1955).

Throughout June 1955, *The People* published a string of articles exhorting land reform cadres to attack the landlord class with more resolve. The June 11 issue published an article titled "Sharpen Even More the Spirit of Vigilance with the Landlord Class: Resolutely Struggle against Rightist Thinking and Fear of the Enemy."¹³ Two days later the newspaper published a pair of articles in a similar spirit. The first was "Raise Vigilance and Destroy the Landlord Class's Scheme of Sabotage" and the second was "Carrying out Self-Criticism for Rightist Thinking."¹⁴ On June 17, *The People* published an article titled "Landlord Ruses to Sabotage the Land Reform in Bắc Giang." Similar articles appeared in July: "After Fixing the Rightist Thinking of Cadres, Land Reform in Lâm-Thành Hamlet Was Successful;"¹⁵ in August: "After Undergoing Thought Reform for Step 2, Cadres Have Begun to Fix Their Rightist Thinking, Work Has Improved;"¹⁶ in September: "Recognize Clearly the Landlords' Schemes and Promptly Repress Their Acts of Sabotage;"¹⁷ in October: "The Rent Reduction Team of Chiến Thắng Subdistrict (Lạng Sơn) Probed Deeply, Found a Cruel Despotic Landlord Ringleader, and Discovered a Commando Organization;"¹⁸ in November: "Working against Enemy Sabotage of the Land Reform in Bắc Ninh—Bắc Giang."¹⁹ Similar ideas about the alleged reaction of the landlord class appear in dozens of other articles about the land reform.

The party's theoretical journal, *Study*, delivered much the same fare. Its opening issue contained an article by Hồ Viết Thắng, the vice-minister of agriculture and one of the most important members of the Central Land Reform Committee. Thắng began with a reformulation of the standard justification for the land reform and concluded with the following assessment of the campaign as it approached its fifth and final wave:

The land reform movement is now entering its decisive phase. We are about to implement wave 5 of the land reform in a large area that had been occupied by the enemy for a long time, that is densely populated, and that is extremely complicated in many respects. The landlord class, which has allied with the Americans and their lackeys, is trying hard to sabotage the land reform and, generally speaking, is sabotaging us in all facets. They stop at no evil scheme to achieve their barbaric and dark goal.²⁰

A shorter article in that first December 1955 issue of *Study* was titled "Raise Revolutionary Vigilance." It conveyed a similar picture of landlord ruses and cadre reluctance:

During wave 4 of the land reform, the landlord class allied with the American imperialists and their lackeys, working to sabotage us ruthlessly. But many of our cadres demonstrated a critical loss of vigilance. The enemy would carry out murders, which one cadre quickly attributed to the deceased people's "fear of having their class raised, afraid of being targeted for struggle, and therefore having committed suicide." The enemy organizes the throwing of dirt and rocks, the burning of houses, and the clipping of telephone wires. A number of comrades do not investigate, or they only investigate superficially. They conclude that "the house burned by accident," or "the wires were cut by mischievous young kids." These cadres fall prey to the arguments put forward by the enemy to throw them off track. Even more serious, there are cadres who blindly "relied" on the enemy's henchmen and listened to them, arresting good poor peasants, or allowing [these henchmen] to borrow documents and clothing to pretend that they are cadres. They [the henchmen] then go to another locality and sabotage the movement there. Because our cadres have lost their vigilance in this way, for a long period of time in a number of places, the enemy was not attacked, the masses were not mobilized, and the work of land reform was delayed.²¹

An article in the following issue of *Study* (January 1956) hammered home the same theme: "The landlord class, especially its cruel and despotic members, its saboteurs, and its spies, are even more furiously, madly, and perfidiously resisting. A number of cadres, having not recognized this situation in a timely manner, have committed serious rightist deviations."²² In February 1956, the journal published an article titled "The Enemy Must be Resolutely and Promptly Attacked in Order to Push Forward Wave 5 of the Land Reform."²³

The Fifth Land Reform Wave: January-July 1956

The mass mobilization campaign had been designed largely along the Chinese model of visiting villages three times (rent reduction, land reform, reinspection). Toward the end of 1955, over half of the DRV rural population had still not experienced the second, land-reform phase of the mass mobilization. Yet the goal of the party leaders had been to complete the campaign in the summer of 1956. At some point toward the latter part of 1955, Thành must have decided that the campaign should not drag on past their self-imposed summer-of-1956 deadline.

The Politburo's solution to the pressure of time was to condense and accelerate the campaign. Communities that had not undergone any of the three mobilization phases would skip rent reduction and immediately undergo the

more radical land-reform phase as part of one enormous fifth and final wave. Still concerned about “rightist tendencies,” Thành and the Politburo decided to call this giant fifth wave the “Điện Biên Phủ wave” in the struggle against the landlord class. It is unclear whether the revised schedule affected the campaign’s reinspection phase.

The Politburo managed reinspection as they had the rent reduction and land reform phases of the mass mobilization: carry out a small experimental wave in a few subdistricts followed by a summing-up meeting that would affirm reinspection’s general goals. The party leaders also released a special reinspection directive, which is referred to in an archival document from the Vietnamese North Interzone Land Reform Committee (to be discussed presently). That directive does not appear in the *Party Documents* series. Yet the document on the reinspection from the Vietnamese North Interzone claims to be “based” on it, enabling us to infer its main points.

As noted above, the reinspection of places that had been through the land-reform phase of mass mobilization could be used to send a signal to land-reform brigade leaders currently preparing to or actually carrying out the campaign’s fifth and final wave. A description of the reinspection in the party’s theoretical journal, *Study*, shows the meaning that party leaders gave to this third and final phase. The experimental wave of reinspection in five communes of Phú Thọ province showed that the land reform phase had, “generally speaking,” been carried out well. This represented “a basic revolutionary victory” for the people of the five communes. “However,” the *Study* article cautioned, “a number of weaknesses remain, such as letting landlords slip through the net (*để lọt*), including some cruel and despotic ones who act as ringleaders of sabotage efforts.” Obviously, the message here was that land-reform brigade leaders had lacked thoroughness in their attacks on the landlord class. “Through reinspection, the scheme of the landlord class to raise their heads up and carry out sabotage was repressed, the spirit of unity in the countryside further strengthened, and production pushed forward.”²⁴

A report on reinspection produced by the Land Reform Committee of the Vietnamese North Zone shows that repression of alleged enemies remained the primary concern:

The Land Reform Committee of the Vietnamese North Interzone
 No. 14 Report
 4/3/1956
 REPORT

Proposed plan for carrying out land reform reinspection waves 2,3,4,5 in the Vietnamese North Interzone.

Based on the directive of the Central Committee and the Interzone leadership, the Vietnamese North Interzone Land Reform Committee held a meeting with the Party leaders of Bắc Giang, Thái Nguyên, Vĩnh Phúc, and Phú Thọ provinces in order to discuss preparations for carrying out the reinspection of the land reform in those provinces that have carried out land reform. In accordance with the spirit of the Central Committee's directive, [reinspection] will first be carried out in important subdistricts such as those lying next to key roads, around provincial towns, in places that have leading [Party and government] offices, and in places where there are important state-owned enterprises. At the same time, [the reinspection of key places] needs to clean up districts, making it easier for the district Party leaders to lead and focus on the task of reinspecting the land reform when completed in their district. After discussing this with provincial leaders, we have come to the following resolutions:

...

The Situation and Special Characteristics of Regions Where We Are Preparing to Reinspect the Land Reform in 4 Provinces of the Vietnamese North Interzone

After studying the spirit of the Central Committee's directive as mentioned above, the interzone leadership made preparations and delegated to comrade Nguyễn Tấn Phúc (the interzone Party member responsible for reinspection) responsibility for meeting with provincial leaders to carry out the plan. On February 22, 1956, they met and discussed with provincial leaders how to prepare reinspection for the above-mentioned subdistricts and to [discuss] the special characteristics of these places:

1. Bắc Giang: We will carry out reinspection in those subdistricts around the provincial town of Phủ Lạng Thương [now Bắc Giang City]. This was a center of activity for the counterrevolutionaries during the resistance war as well as after the establishment of peace and during the land reform. Moreover, it is a place where we have many of our enterprises such as factories, a train platform, and important offices. It also has important road and water transportation routes such as highway 1, the railroad, a large bridge, a port, etc. It is a densely populated place. During the third wave of the land reform there, the enemy carried out serious acts of sabotage such as the murder of six people in Hung Tien and three murders in Thọ Xương. In Sông

Mai, Tân Mỹ, and Chi minh, there occurred serious incidents of sabotage such as killing people and burning houses. This was the region where the enemy operated most strongly against the land-reform brigade during Wave 3. But we struggled against the enemy's efforts at sabotage very weakly. There was not a single subdistrict where the culprit of a planned murder was found in a satisfactory way, and there was no place where the base of the enemy's reactionary organization was thoroughly discovered. After the land reform, the enemy carried out serious acts of sabotage. Common among the above subdistricts were efforts to sabotage tax collection, sabotage production, and burn houses. Even more serious is the fact that there are places like Thọ Xương where mines have been set three times (one time was by a pile of bamboo planks about to be used by the army for the construction of a house, one time by the door of the Agricultural Department, and one time a bomb was set just before the arrival of a French peace convoy to visit us—it was defused afterward.) Also, in this subdistrict, after the land reform, there are 11 youths who meet on their own initiative to engage in debauchery [*chơi bời*] and to go [text unreadable] with each other. Four months ago, in Tân Mỹ, there was a murder that remains unsolved, or, as in Thái Sơn during a morning meeting about taxes, a guerrilla hid and threw a grenade into the meeting spot. With respect to our organization, there are places where 2/3 of the Party cell executive committee lies silent like in Thờ Xương, where we suspect that the general secretary of the Party branch is an enemy element.²⁵

The report's descriptions of the other three provinces slated for reinspection had the same focus on security and repression, with little time devoted to issues of agriculture. Reinspection cadres, like rent-reduction and land-reform cadres before them, would enter communities and, for a third time, look for people who could be punished as "cruel despotic landlords" or "enemy elements."

Khrushchev's Secret Speech (February 24, 1956)

In early February 1956, as wave 5 of the land reform was picking up steam, Trường Chinh and fellow Politburo member Lê Đức Thọ traveled together to Beijing. There they joined the Chinese Communist Party delegation heading to the Soviet Union for the CPSU 20th Congress, to be held in Moscow from February 14 to 24.²⁶ This meant that Chinh would be absent from the DRV for

over a month during the largest wave of the mass mobilization, when more than half the North's rural population would undergo land reform. This absence does not square with the level of blame that Chinh would end up shouldering for the campaign's violence. Had Chinh played an indispensable role in the campaign's implementation, would Thành would have permitted him to leave the DRV for over a month during the campaign's crucial final wave?

In reality, the land reform campaign was the project of the Politburo, and probably no one person of that body was indispensable to the campaign's implementation. Hoàng Quốc Việt, Phạm Văn Đồng, and, of course, Thành himself, could just as easily have met with the Central Land Reform Committee and provided instructions to Hồ Việt Thắng, the person who connected the party leaders in Hanoi with the mass-mobilization brigade leaders in the countryside.

Khrushchev's secret speech, delivered the night of February 24, 1956 at the CPSU 20th Congress, was titled, "On the Personality Cult and its Consequences." The term "personality cult" was the Soviet leader's way of referring to what Westerners called "Stalinism." In his speech, Khrushchev spoke for roughly four hours about Stalin's crimes and shortcomings as a leader. In the words of Khrushchev biographer William Taubman, the secret speech "was the bravest and most reckless thing [Khrushchev] ever did. The Soviet regime never fully recovered and neither did he."²⁷

Khrushchev's speech focused on how "the cult of the person of Stalin" became "the source of a whole series of exceedingly serious and grave perversions of Party principles, of Party democracy, and of revolutionary legality." Over the years, the "accumulation of immense and limitless powers in the hands of one person" had caused "great harm" to the CPSU and the Soviet Union. Providing quotes from Marx and Lenin, Khrushchev pointed out "how severely the classics of Marxism-Leninism denounced every manifestation of the cult of the individual."²⁸

After establishing the heterodox nature of Stalin's personality cult, Khrushchev explored its manifestations. The bulk of the secret speech was devoted to the period from 1934 to 1938, what the historian Robert Conquest referred to as the "Great Terror."²⁹ According to Khrushchev, this was when "Stalin's willfulness vis-à-vis the Party and its Central Committee became fully apparent." In the speech, Khrushchev detailed Stalin's "fabrication of cases," his "false accusations," and his "glaring abuses of socialist legality, which resulted in the death of innocent people."³⁰ Among those innocent people were 98 members of the 139-member Central Committee in 1934. These men, "often no longer able to

bear barbaric tortures,” confessed to “all kinds of grave and unlikely crimes,” for which they “were arrested and shot.”

Though Chinh and Thọ did not attend the “Closed Session” during which Khrushchev delivered his famous speech, they would have received copies of it before leaving Moscow. Reading the speech, Chinh must have been concerned about its striking relevance to the situation back home in North Vietnam. First, the DRV obviously had a full-blown personality cult, which had now been shown to be contrary to the ideas of Marx and Lenin. Second, Chinh and his comrades in the Politburo had promoted Stalin as a great leader of the “democratic” camp. In the secret speech, he looked like a paranoid dictator, a mass murderer, and a disastrous bungler during early days of WWII. Third, the secret speech focused on Stalin’s crimes during a period, 1934 to 1938, that overlapped precisely with Thành’s longest stay in Moscow. Having witnessed this period, how would the DRV leader explain his promotion of Stalin and the Soviet system? Fourth, the violations of “socialist legality” described by Khrushchev were similar to practices that the VWP leaders were now employing in the land reform campaign: the idea that “enemies” lurked in every community, the extraction of false confessions (usually through threats and torture), the abandonment of “normal” judicial procedures (the Special People’s Courts), and official pressure on those courts to deliver rapid verdicts.

If rank-and-file party members were to read Khrushchev’s secret speech, they might lose faith in the Politburo and the Soviet Union. How could Chinh, Thọ, and other party leaders continue to insist on the moral superiority of the Soviet Union if Khrushchev’s shocking depiction of Stalin’s bloody reign were to become well known? Khrushchev all but guaranteed this eventuality when he ordered that the speech be distributed widely and studied carefully by party members in the Soviet Union.³¹ What if the speech fell into the hands of the Capitalist bloc and rank-and-file party members heard about it via news sources of that bloc? In such a scenario, it might appear that the DRV leaders were afraid of the speech and had intentionally tried to conceal its message. As it turned out, the West learned of Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin the day after it happened, obtained a copy of the actual speech in mid-April, and published it in major newspapers in early June. In the next chapter, I will examine how the DRV’s party leaders handled the dangerous messages of the 20th Congress, especially its call for the Communist bloc to fight against the cult of personality.

The implications of the 20th Congress were addressed by the party leaders at the 9th Plenum of the Central Committee held from April 19 to 24, 1956. The

internal documents produced from that plenum express ideas about the Hồ Chí Minh personality cult and about some of the other main messages of the CPSU 20th Congress. But the documents contain no discussion of how Khrushchev's thoughts about Stalin's crimes might be relevant to the DRV's mass mobilization campaign.

On May 5 and 6, 1956, ten days after the close of the Central Committee's 9th Plenum, the Central Land Reform Committee held its eighth meeting. Again, it seems significant that the meeting was held immediately following the 9th Plenum of the Central Committee, as though the ideas about the campaign from the top party leaders were transmitted to the Central Land Reform Committee after having been presented to the more powerful and important Central Committee.

Through informal means, I was able to obtain a copy of the report on the mass mobilization read by one of the campaign's most important leaders, Hồ Việt Thắng, the vice-minister of agriculture. As with virtually all party reports on the implementation of policy, Thắng's report to Central Land Reform Committee took a linear approach, criticizing "deviations" both to the right and to the left of the imagined correct line. Although Thắng did acknowledge the occurrence of "leftist excesses" such as the use of torture to uncover "reactionary organizations," on balance, he still leaned to the side of "rightist deviations" as the primary danger. Thắng began with the following description:

One: Achievements of Wave 5 after Three Steps of Work

The special characteristic of wave 5 is [that it comprises] important regions, regions that have just recently been liberated, the area next to the demilitarized zone, the coastal areas, places heavily populated by Catholics, and areas surrounding cities. The situation in these areas is very complicated.

Throughout the past period, the landlord class allied with the reactionary lackeys of the American imperialists to furiously resist and sabotage the land reform. They carry out their sabotage in a comprehensive manner, using schemes that are sophisticated and Machiavellian, not stopping at the most barbaric and cruel actions. They:

Propagandize a march to the North, propagandize war.

Plant the problem of being related [to landlords], distort all aspects of our policy in order to create anxiety among the masses.

... have their henchmen carry out confessions, make fake documents, use beautiful women, all with the intention of tricking cadres and getting them to focus on a different target of struggle.

The most barbaric is killing people. They kill poor peasant denouncers [*khố chủ*] to prevent them from speaking bitterness. They even kill children in order to repress the spirit of the masses, murder cadres to carry out revenge, kill each other in order to silence informers. Up to now, they have instigated many cases of murder, fifteen of which have led to the death of land reform cadres.

They destroy production and sabotage the government's ability to implement its State plan. In many places, they wreck irrigation dams, dump insects into fields, and kill buffalos.

The [Party] organizations in these areas are impure to a critical degree. In many cases of sabotage, [land reform cadres] have discovered the participation of guerrillas that were planted by the enemy.

Thắng then moved to the "successes" of the campaign in wave 5. These were listed numerically from one to six. Though we should not read too much into their order, it seems significant that the first was the land reform's "overthrow" of "cruel despotic landlords" and the "strong repression" of "saboteurs." As this first of the six "successes" explained, "through the effective mobilization of the masses against the enemy's sabotage, in many places [the campaign] was able to uncover most of the cases of sabotage." And knowing how to "sow internal divisions among the enemy, [land reform cadres] were able to discover reactionary organizations, strike down their ringleaders and backbone elements while winning over and educating those people who took the wrong path."³² The second "success" was the expropriation of land and food from landlords; third was the confiscation of weapons; fourth was the reorganization of party and state political bodies at the local level; fifth was the (alleged) peasant enthusiasm for raising production; and sixth was the "dogged working spirit" shown by mass mobilization cadres, who were willing to "endure hardships" to complete their tasks.

After establishing these "successes," Thắng shifted to the land reform's weaknesses. Here the inherent ambiguity of the linear analytical approach is apparent, as it is unclear from the following criticism how a cadre should act:

In general, there is still a lack of determination and especially a lack of thoroughness in striking the enemy. But there are also many places where signs of leftist deviations have appeared (arresting too many people in a careless manner, repressing [enemies] without attempting to sow divisions as well). Signs of disorganization and lack of discipline have also appeared in many places, with [cadres] arresting people without asking higher-ups for directions. Through a lack of thoroughness in striking against the enemy,

a lack of combining strikes with efforts to propagandize broadly the policy, and through a lack of striking at the ringleaders in order to divide the enemy to the highest degree, up to now, there are still many places where the enemy carries out serious acts of sabotage and the masses are still afraid of the enemy.

A land reform cadre reading this passage could ask the question, “how hard do I need to attack the enemy to avoid being accused of exhibiting the ‘general’ lack of determination while not taking things too far, committing ‘leftist deviations?’” Or, the cadre might ask, “is the enemy still carrying out ‘serious acts of sabotage’ because cadres lacked thoroughness or because they have not confined their strikes to the enemy ringleaders?”

Thắng’s report acknowledged weaknesses in the land reform’s “reorganization” of party branches. And here we see another early hint of the official explanation that the party leaders would soon use to explain the violence of the campaign. “The task of building our forces, of reorganizing Party branches, has not yet received the right amount of attention.” Without naming a subject, Thắng stated that the “estimation of the situation with respect to existing organizations [in the countryside] is not yet correct; it is still one-sided, stressing the one perspective of the organizations as dominated by the enemy with the result that many land reform teams punished too many Party members and old cadres.”

But in other sections of the report, the older narrative of the enemy as virtually omnipresent in the countryside appears again. For example, despite recognizing the “one-sided” judgment of local party organizations and having attacked “too many” party members during the reorganization, Thắng was still able to describe in positive terms the method of attacking the enemy during the campaign:

Compared with wave 4, this wave [we have] struck against the cruel and despotic landlords harder and more quickly. This is because we learned lessons from the experience from wave 4. Therefore, through propagandizing our policies, through the masses’ speak bitterness sessions, when we saw any person who fit the requirements for a cruel and despotic landlord we promptly arrested him, even though we had not yet held a large peasant meeting. After that, we promptly moved to mobilize the masses to carry out each step of struggle, starting small and expanding out, combining that with the efforts to build forces [in the community]. In many subdistricts, right from the fourth or fifth day, cruel and despotic landlords were arrested, and on the thirteenth day, [cadres] immediately struggled against and tried those landlords who had many serious crimes. As a result

of this method, generally speaking, right from the beginning, we took the initiative to strike the enemy, to raise the movement higher, to generate momentum for the masses and to lower the momentum of the enemy. We also carried out these measures as a result of the special characteristics of the situation during this wave, for which a few features stand out:

According to Hồ Việt Thắng, one important feature of the campaign's final wave was its coverage of "recently liberated areas" that had not yet passed through rent reduction and where the enemy was "stubborner" than in the old liberated areas. Another characteristic was that the masses were in an "extremely wretched state after having been occupied by the enemy for too long." This allegedly meant that their "hatred was high."

Thắng might also have pointed out that wave 5 of the land reform covered the densely populated regions of the Red River delta near the port of Haiphong. For rural elites or State of Vietnam supporters who heard rumors about the land reform and feared being targeted as "cruel despotic landlords," escape to the South during the period of the 300 days was less difficult because of the proximity to Haiphong. Thắng's report hints at the problem of too few targets:

The places that went in circles a lot usually did so because, from the beginning, [cadres] did not promptly and strongly repress those saboteurs who were not from the landlord class. As a result, the masses did not dare speak bitterness strongly, and we did not find cruel and despotic landlords. Where people were fooled was always in carrying out a right-deviationist approach to the enemy—more specifically, not strongly repressing the saboteurs. This happened mainly because [cadres] did not grasp the new demand put forward by the Central Committee: repress the active counterrevolutionaries and break apart reactionary organizations. Another factor [leading to the above steps] was that during wave four's summing-up session, many brigade leaders criticized cadres for repressing recklessly in one direction. As a result, many cadres, whenever they saw saboteurs who were not landlords, or when they were still unsure whether a saboteur were a landlord, would not dare go after them.

Before that impasse, the Central Land Reform Committee Standing Committee promptly straightened out these mistakes. This helped cadres grasp in a more concrete manner the demand for striking the enemy and helped them see more clearly the enemy's movement. As a result, [cadres] attacked the enemy more forcefully, repressed saboteurs more promptly, and attacked more strongly the cruel despotic landlords and the backbone

elements of the counterrevolutionaries carrying out sabotage and constraining the masses.

Despite this heavy stress on “rightist deviations,” Hồ Việt Thắng was already beginning to give ground and concede to the possibility of “leftist deviations” as a problem of the campaign. However, Thắng expressed that problem in a manner that was still consistent with the Politburo’s characterization of the countryside as full of landlords and spies:

But when cadres struck strongly against the enemy, the enemy often carried out sabotage, leading to the use of torture to make people confess to being members of reactionary organizations. There were places where cadres understood the punishment of cruel and despotic landlords currently in power to mean striking against members of the local puppet administration. So they tended to follow the list of puppet administration members and arrest accordingly.

The report at the 8th Meeting of the Central Land Reform Committee continued to discuss unsatisfactory results of the land reform in this manner, tending to blame the “leftist excesses” committed by cadres as responses to “sophisticated and organized enemy sabotage.” Yet, here and there, cautiously and inconsistently, Thắng also conceded that some aspects of the party’s conception of the rural situation in general and of the party organizations in particular may not have been entirely accurate. But a full-scale dislodgement of the official view seeing “rightist deviations” as the primary danger had not yet occurred. In his report, Thắng still included radicalizing elements similar to those used by the party leaders throughout much of the campaign, especially during the last year. An example is his account of the land reform reinspection:

REINSPECTION WORK

Landlords

During the land reform, the landlord class, generally speaking, was hit hard. But during the land reform, [cadres] did not yet discover all of the cruel and despotic landlords. During the current wave of land reform re-inspection, [cadres] still uncovered 23 cruel and despotic landlords comprising 13.29% of the number of cruel and despotic landlords found during the land reform [phase]. Even more serious is that there were landlords who had slipped down and were marked as poor peasants.

In addition to those, we found 30 landlords who slipped through the net, of which 10 were cruel and despotic ones, with 4 having been labeled

as middle peasants, one as a poor peasant, and five as rich peasants. As such, we calculated that the total number of landlords [for these subdistricts] makes up 4.4% of the total population, with cruel and despotic landlords comprising 23% of the total number of landlords.

With respect to reactionary organizations, during the land reform, [cadres] had not discovered many. Now, of the 43 subdistricts assigned to the Phú Thọ land reform brigade for re-inspection, 39 were found to have reactionary organizations. Of the cruel and despotic landlords who slipped through the net and of those landlords who resist the law, the majority are in reactionary organizations. They carry out serious acts of sabotage. After the land reform and during the re-inspection, they killed 53 peasants. (18 of those occurred during the re-inspection of the land reform). There were also 74 incidents of arson, 75 incidents of sabotage of production along with many other incidents such as the cutting of telephone wire, the destruction of the railroad, etc.³³

Throughout most of April 1956, the discourse in *The People* continued to mention landlords having “slipped through the net” and the discovery of cases of sabotage—the elements that were typically used by the party leaders to incite cadres to more determined attacks on the regime’s enemies. At some point in the middle of the month, though, the party leaders seem to have decided that the time had come to distance themselves from the campaign’s violence and injustices. On April 21, Politburo member Nguyễn Duy Trinh released what appears to be the party’s first internal directive acknowledging that “leftist” mistakes were more numerous than “rightist” ones. His directive spoke for the first time openly of “many places listening to enemy confessions and using torture to discover those party members who had participated in reactionary organizations.” Now positioning the party leaders as the dedicated advocates of legal due process, “socialist legality” as Khrushchev referred to it at the CPSU 20th Congress, Trinh criticized mass mobilization cadres for “not investigating, researching, and checking documents [used as evidence] carefully.”

Indeed, this was the beginning of the process by which the brunt of the blame for the land reform’s violence would be placed on the land reform apparatus rather than on the top party leaders who conceived of and manipulated the campaign from start to finish.

As for the reason why these mistakes occurred, one factor was the lack of clarity in the political standpoint and thinking of land reform cadres. This lowered their level of political awareness and resulted in substandard work.

They did not grasp firmly the method and policy of constructing the party. But another part [of the reason for these mistakes] was that land reform brigade leaders and interzone leaders lacked closeness in their management of the campaign.³⁴

By the end of June, the Politburo had shifted the public land reform discourse to “leftist errors” as the campaign’s primary problem. On June 25, the Central Land Reform Committee held its 9th meeting, and, following the lead of the Nguyễn Duy Trinh directive of May 21, had begun to adopt the new view.³⁵

A close examination of the campaign’s structure, the type of training that land reform cadres received, the content of land reform reports, and the Politburo’s public discourse about the campaign all suggest the opposite of the official assessment. It was only through the Politburo’s and the land reform brigade leaders’ tight management of the campaign that the remarkable level of violence and injustice had been possible.

From the perspective of Nguyễn Tất Thành and the Politburo, the timing and content of Khrushchev’s secret speech could not have been worse. One day, scholars may be allowed to read the notes of DRV Politburo meetings. I believe that the meetings in March and April of 1956, the two months following Khrushchev’s secret speech, will reveal a sense of derailment with respect to how Thành, Trường Chinh, and other top party leaders had planned to handle the conclusion of the land reform. Their original plan was probably to carry out a 90 percent whitewash of the campaign similar to what Mao had done in China.

The party leaders would have touted the overall success of the land reform and flooded the DRV media with narratives of peasant joy and prosperity. Next to this overwhelming narrative of success would have been official recognition that, here and there, land reform cadres had committed some “mistakes” in their implementation of the party’s “correct” policy. This would have been accompanied by promises to investigate and address those mistakes as Mao had done in China. The party leaders may have planned that, after this burst of praise for the land reform, they would promptly shelve the topic and turn attention to agricultural collectivization and the struggle for national unification.

Khrushchev’s secret speech, because it directly condemned brutal Stalinist methods that were fundamental to the land reform, because it called for party leaders to listen to voices from below, and because it criticized personality cults, put Thành and the Politburo in a position of uncertainty. In this weakened position, the planned 90-percent whitewash (my theory) was no longer safe—a 60-percent whitewash would have to suffice. But the toxic nature of the land

reform campaign meant that even a partial admission of responsibility would prove destabilizing. The fallout would begin a slow chain reaction that would result in a change in party leadership. Thành's determination to protect the Hồ cult from the contagion of the land reform would require the scapegoating of his loyal lieutenant, Trường Chinh. By October 1956, the DRV's leading foursome of Thành, Chinh, Phạm Văn Đồng, and Võ Nguyên Giáp would begin to come apart, opening up room for the rise of two other Politburo members, Lê Duẩn and Lê Đức Thọ.

Fallout, 1956

The year 1956 was a difficult one for the DRV. During the first half of the year, the majority of North Vietnam's rural population went through the terrifying experience of land reform. Thousands of arrests, imprisonments, trials, and executions broke apart families and communities, leaving much of the countryside in a state of moral and material devastation. In August, a DRV intellectual in Hanoi wrote in his diary, "After land reform, the peasants fight with each other over water drainage, trying to save their crops from flooding. [Ngô Đình] Diệm is mobilizing a new movement for emigration. This time, maybe the entire mass base [*quần chúng cơ bản*] will go."¹ For about a week in early November, several hundred angry Catholic Vietnamese in the province of Nghệ An (Quỳnh Lưu district) carried out protests against the DRV regime, claiming that their religion had been "violated." The Politburo sent an entire infantry division to disperse the protesters and restore order—the number of people arrested or killed in this operation remains unknown.²

Indeed, the Politburo spent much of 1956 carrying out damage control related to the CPSU 20th Congress, fallout from the land reform, and intellectual calls for reform. Khrushchev's calls for "socialist legality," "party democracy," and "struggle against the cult of personality" threw Thành and his lieutenants off balance but thrilled many of North Vietnam's intellectuals. They took advantage of the situation to demand reforms and push back the boundaries of the party-state. Uncertain how seriously to take Moscow's recent calls for reform, Thành and the Politburo shifted back and forth between repression and toleration in their handling of these internal challenges.³

The signals from Beijing in 1956 were also confusing. In September, Mao launched his 100 Flowers Campaign, encouraging PRC intellectuals to air their grievances. DRV reformers in Hanoi treated this as a green light to begin publishing a handful of independent journals, the most famous of which were the newspaper *Nhân văn* (Humanity) and the literary journal *Giai phẩm*

(Masterworks). Sensing the party leadership's desire to stay in step with Khrushchev and Mao, these DRV intellectuals guessed correctly that their independent periodicals would be safe from party repression as long as the democratic winds from Beijing and Moscow continued to blow. The result was three tense months of something close to civil society in Hanoi. Dozens of DRV intellectuals participated in what the regime would pejoratively call the "Nhân văn-Giai phẩm Affair" (named after the movement's two most important publications).

The Politburo's Initial Response to the CPSU 20th Congress

The North Vietnamese press's first mention of Khrushchev's term, "cult of personality" (*sùng bái cá nhân*), came in the February 27, 1956 issue of *The People*, three days after the secret speech. The term appeared in a Vietnamese translation of the official resolution of the CPSU 20th Congress. But the resolution mentioned nothing of Stalin, merely instructing party members to apply Leninism in the "struggle against the cult of personality." Buried in the middle of an entire newspaper page devoted to the resolution, the reference was not likely to attract attention from Vietnamese readers. The following day, *The People* published a front-page editorial titled "The 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Succeeded Spectacularly." According to the editorial:

Every day the prestige of the CPSU grows and its relationship with the masses tightens. Under the collective leadership of the [Soviet Union's] Central Executive Committee, the Party has fixed mistakes and corrected deviations in its activities and work. The Party has struggled with great determination against the cult of personality and the overemphasis on the role of the individual in history.⁴

A person with no knowledge of Khrushchev's secret speech was still not likely to notice this brief mention of the cult of personality. For years, Thành and other party leaders had been complaining about selfishness and individualism among members of the DRV regime. Therefore, those party members who did read this message from Moscow probably would have interpreted the reference to a "cult of personality" as meaning roughly "individualism," not the type of personality cult that Khrushchev had described in his February 24 secret speech.

Not accidentally, *The People* made no effort in this initial announcement to ensure that readers understood the difference between Khrushchev's "cult of personality" and the VWP's "individualism." The former was a sin of Stalin's—the latter was a sin of party underlings. Of the secret speech's roughly

300 paragraphs, only four linked the cult of personality to anyone other than Stalin. (Those four paragraphs mentioned the practice of high-ranking CPSU leaders naming towns, factories, and collective farms after themselves.) For the next month, Thành and the DRV leaders continued to avoid any substantive discussion of Stalin's legacy or to provide any clues about what had happened at the 20th Congress. According to the DRV intellectual Vũ Thư Hiên, Thành and the Politburo decided that only they and a few other top-echelon members of the Secretariat would be allowed to read the secret speech.⁵

The diary of the prominent DRV intellectual Nguyễn Huy Tưởng (1912–1960) shows why Thành had been reluctant to mention the criticism of Stalin much less distribute widely the actual secret speech. Tưởng's first mention of Khrushchev's reappraisal of Stalin appears in the diary's March 27 entry. On that day, Tưởng wrote: "I read the report from the 20th Congress of the CPSU. I am concerned—I don't understand why Stalin could not be mentioned."⁶ This diary entry suggests that the revolutionary writer and his intellectual friends in the field of literature had not understood the context of the initial mention of the term "cult of personality" in the February 28 issue of *The People*. As a high-ranking party member with a chair on the editorial board of the DRV's preeminent cultural newspaper, *Literature and Arts*, Tưởng would have been a daily reader of *The People*. He was also a member of the Soviet-Vietnamese Friendship Association, a position seemingly well placed to hear the latest news from Moscow. Indeed, he had spent a month touring the Soviet Union the previous November. Had other intellectuals in the DRV got wind of Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin, Tưởng surely would have heard about it through the rumor mill soon thereafter.

On March 31, *The People* printed a Politburo announcement about the CPSU 20th Congress. Once again, there was mention of "collective leadership" and "struggling against the cult of personality," but no Stalin. The following day, April 1, 1956, thirty-five days after Khrushchev had delivered his secret speech and ten days after its content had been discussed in the South Vietnamese press, the party leaders ended their policy of concealment. *The People* published its first article mentioning Stalin's name in association with the cult of personality. This appears to have been done to coincide with the arrival of the CPSU Presidium member, Anastas Mikoyan, who was a strong supporter of Khrushchev's move to denounce Stalin's crimes. The article was a translation of a recent *Pravda* article, "Why the Cult of Personality Is Contrary to Marxism-Leninism."⁷

By delaying until the day of Mikoyan's arrival, the DRV leaders were able to benefit from some of the damage control and backtracking that had already

begun in Moscow. By mid-March, the destabilizing effect of his secret speech had become apparent, and Khrushchev had begun to “walk back” his narrative. In the secret speech, he had described the cult of personality as a phenomenon created mainly by Stalin. In the subsequent *Pravda* article published in *The People*, the Soviet leaders had loosened the meaning of the term to shift blame away from Stalin and onto the masses. Thus, a personality cult now involved “eulogizing people more than they deserve, assigning to them special qualities and a superhuman substance, as though turning them into people who specialize in the creation of legends and then bending one’s head down in reverence.”⁸ Stalin’s agency in the development of the cult was subtly reduced: “The cult of personality spread and restricted the effectiveness of the Party and people, reduced the effectiveness of the Party’s collective leadership, and often brought about serious weaknesses in work.”

The *Pravda* article praised Stalin’s contributions to the workers’ movement, claiming that he was one of the best Marxist-Leninist theoreticians and that he had risen to power because of his important position as party general secretary. There was no mention of Lenin’s opposition to Stalin’s assumption of power (Khrushchev had pointed this out in the beginning of his secret speech) or of Stalin’s use of police terror in his consolidation of power. Indeed, the secret speech had suggested that people praised Stalin because their lives depended on it. Now:

The cult of personality grew and developed on the basis of the great historical achievements of Marxism-Leninism, the great successes of our Soviet people and Communist Party in the tasks of building socialism, the victory in the great patriotic war, the unceasing consolidation of our society and state regime, and the raising of our international prestige. Those great achievements . . . were not explained correctly according to a Marxist-Leninist perspective but rather were incorrectly attributed to one person, Stalin himself, and considered to be the special achievements made on the basis of his leadership position. Lacking modesty, Stalin did not find a way to stop the adulation that people bestowed on him, but rather looked for any way to increase and inspire that adulation.⁹

Despite the retreat from secret-speech explanations and the move toward depictions of Stalin as a victim of his own greatness, DRV intellectuals still seem to have found the article shocking. Apparently referring to this article, Nguyễn Huy Tưởng wrote in his diary on the day of the *Pravda* article’s publication:

April 1st, 1956

Just read the *Pravda* article criticizing comrade Stalin's big weakness: the cult of personality. I'm not very happy. This is a big victory. The CPSU must be really great to do this. But I still keep feeling puzzled. Is there sabotage? What is the benefit at this time? What if the enemy distorts it? Now I am thinking about the graves of Lenin and Stalin. What about Stalin's statues? What about the books that mention Stalin? I pity Stalin. This great man has already died—what is the point of digging up this issue? Why did people not struggle against [the personality cult] when comrade Stalin's reign first began? However it is, we still need to believe in the CPSU. The reality is that the Soviet Union's policy of peace these past few years has achieved great victories. Just read Khrushchev's report. Very good. Really big. So correct. Many new ideas. But there is still a cloud hanging over my head.¹⁰

As it appears, only after reading this April 1st *Pravda* article in *The People* did Tường realize that Khrushchev had criticized Stalin. The question that Tường asks, "Why did people not struggle against [the cult of personality] when comrade Stalin's reign first began?" was probably the one that caused Thành, Trường Chinh, and other party leaders around the world to lose the most sleep. For it suggested that the Soviet Union under Stalin had been a dictatorship, pure and simple, and had had nothing to do with democracy, "old" or "new."

On April 8, 1956, *The People* printed another article about the 20th Congress, "The Historical Experience of the Proletarian Dictatorship." This one was written by the editorial staff of the Chinese Communist Party's main newspaper, *The People's Daily*, and reflected the ideas of Mao and his Politburo. As with the March 28 *Pravda* article, the Chinese one suggested that, to some extent, Stalin had been a victim of his greatness. The cult of personality had initially developed around him without his active participation.¹¹

In support of this view, the Chinese article claimed that Stalin had made his mistakes in the final part of his life (i.e., after all the accomplishments and not as a means of consolidating his power). This departed from Khrushchev's secret speech, which had focused on Stalin's behavior from 1934 until 1938, the early-middle part of his reign. The Chinese article was the first in the DRV press to mention specific mistakes Stalin had made: his lack of preparedness in WWII, his lack of attention to agriculture, his poor handling of Yugoslavia, and his overestimation of the problem of purging traitors. In these areas, Stalin had been guilty of "subjective" thinking.

The CCP article contributed to the discourse by advancing a theoretical explanation for personality cults. The desire to exonerate Marxism-Leninism, the Soviet system, and Stalin from the cult of personality is apparent:

The cult of personality is a rotten remnant left behind by mankind's long history. The cult of personality not only has a basis in the exploitative class, but also in the small producers. . . . The cult of personality is also mainly a force of habit of millions of people. With such a force remaining in society, it can influence people who work for the State, and even influence leaders like Stalin.

On the day when this Chinese article was published, Nguyễn Huy Tưởng wrote in his diary:

April 8th, 1956. Still lots of focus on the speech "Against the cult of personality." Cadres are concerned [*thắc mắc*]. Stalin's books, his statues, his pictures, his songs? There are those who still kept their funeral sashes from Stalin's death; now they bring them out, look at them, and cry. Mr. Trường Chinh at the 20th Party Congress, on learning of this, was also concerned and could not sleep the entire night.¹²

On April 15, 1956, *The People* printed a 20th Congress article written by the French Communist Party leader, Maurice Thorez. It was titled, "Some Basic Problems Advanced at the CPSU's 20th Congress." Similar to Mao, Thorez claimed, in stark contrast to Khrushchev's original secret speech, that "Stalin's mistakes had occurred during the last period of his activity when he did not respect a few rules concerning Party activities and leadership, rules that he himself had taught to communists of the world, especially in his book, *Issues of Leninism*."¹³ In Khrushchev's secret speech, Stalin's theoretical works did not correspond to the way he ruled. Whatever Stalin had accomplished as a leader appeared to have resulted mostly from other principles and tactics not mentioned in his books.

Official Party Explanations of CPSU 20th Congress

The DRV's party leaders finally offered their own analysis of the personality cult and Stalin's legacy at the 9th Meeting of the Party Central Executive Committee held April 19–24, 1956. It was now nearly two months since the CPSU 20th Congress. This party meeting produced three documents that addressed

Stalin and the question of whether the “struggle against the personality cult” applied to the DRV. The first was a Politburo report written by Trường Chinh and titled, “On the Task of Grasping Thoroughly the Principle of Collective Leadership and Raising the Party’s Role.” The second was the official “Resolution 9” produced at the end of the meeting, and the third was Thành’s closing statement. The party leaders also provided official explanations in their theoretic journal, *Study*.

On the question of Stalin’s legacy, the Central Committee resolution stated:

The 20th Congress criticized in a serious way a few views and styles that are contrary to Marxism-Leninism. It highlighted the importance of collective leadership, the fight against the personality cult, specifically against the personality cult of Stalin. . . . Stalin is one of the most outstanding Marxists and he made an enormous contribution to the CPSU and the Soviet people as he did to socialist and people’s liberation movements around the world. But in the last period of his life, Stalin committed some serious mistakes and didn’t realize it.¹⁴

What was a cult of personality and how could one have existed in a progressive, democratic, and modern state such as the Soviet Union? According to the scholar E. A. Rees, “[a] leader cult is an established system of veneration of a political leader, to which all members of the society are expected to subscribe, a system that is omnipresent and ubiquitous and one that is expected to persist indefinitely.”¹⁵ According to Trường Chinh:

The cult of personality is an ugly remnant of ages past. It has its basis in the exploiting classes and in the small producers. After the exploiting class was destroyed and the small producers were replaced by collective production, under the proletarian dictatorship, socialism was built. A number of remnants of the ugly thinking of the old society remained for quite a long time in the heads of the people. Many of those thoughts became the custom of millions of people, turning into a fearsome force. The cult of personality is one of those ugly old remnants. When it became the custom of a majority of society, it created an atmosphere of veneration capable of influencing the leaders of the Party and State, making them enjoy receiving that veneration. This gradually led to arrogance, separation from reality, distance from the masses and from the collective, and a failure to humbly study the masses. It also led to a lack of respect for the Party’s principles of collective leadership turning into dogmatic individualism.¹⁶

In his definition, Rees stresses that the leader cult is a “deliberately constructed and managed mechanism, which aims at the integration of the political system around the leader’s persona.” Chinh’s anxiety about the role of communist parties in creating leader cults appears in his sentence construction. None of his sentences about personality cults has “party” as the active subject:

When the proletarian dictatorship was first established in history in an agricultural country, with the working class lacking leadership experience, the cult of personality was able to slip in and cause damage. It arose and developed on the basis of the great historic successes achieved by the Party and State of the Soviet Union. It’s not unlike a dark shadow stuck to the great successes of the people in the process of building socialism.¹⁷

A Cult of Personality in the DRV?

Trương Chinh began his section on the cult of personality with two questions: “Today in our Party, in our attitude toward our leader, do we see a personality cult? And if we do, how has the phenomenon affected the leadership of our Party?” The report immediately conceptualized the cult of personality as a bottom-up phenomenon restricted in importance to the functioning of the party. This meant that the question of Thành’s responsibility for the Hồ cult was not on the agenda. Neither were larger philosophical questions such as whether a state-managed personality cult (not acknowledged in Chinh’s characterization of the cult as a spontaneous phenomenon) was a healthy development for regular Vietnamese people or whether democracy and socialism were possible under a regime that maintained such a cult. Ultimately, Chinh steered clear of any language that acknowledged the party leadership’s deliberate creation, promotion, and protection of the Hồ cult and limited his discussion mostly to the question of how much Central Executive Committee members idolized Thành:

Chairman Hồ is our Party’s leader. Chairman Hồ has made a great contribution to the establishment and education of our Party. He has sacrificed his entire life for the revolution, and his spirit of struggle is absolute. . . . Chairman Hồ is the sagacious leader of our Party, our people, and our race [*dân tộc*]. Therefore, our Party’s promotion of Chairman Hồ’s role and our reverence for him as a person is correct.¹⁸

The report then stressed Thành’s respect for the ideas of others and his general implementation of “collective leadership.” Moreover, “Chairman Hồ is

public-spirited and selfless, willing to forget himself for the good of the collective and to share in joys and sorrows.” Essentially, the Politburo report stayed carefully within the confines of the Hồ Chí Minh cult. “He is simple and modest. Many times the Central Committee has asked to award Chairman Hồ medals, and every time Chairman Hồ refuses. We can tell many such stories.”¹⁹

However, according to Chinh’s Politburo report, to some extent, a personality cult around Chairman Hồ did exist. “Because, generally speaking, our leader’s role has been raised to a greater extent than that of the Party, today, in the Party as well as among the people, a certain reliance on our leader has come about, and more or less, our leader has been deified.” As for the impact of the Hồ cult:

These deviations have affected our ability to mobilize enough collective leadership in the Party. They have impacted the sense of responsibility held by Central Committee members and have affected our self-confidence. They have affected the sense of responsibility and the zealous creative spirit of all Party levels, of all mass organization members, and, speaking even more generally, of all the people.²⁰

Why had this cult of personality come into existence? Chinh stressed the large professional gap between Thành and other party members. “Chairman Hồ is an old revolutionary with lots of experience, prestige, and accomplishments. Because of that, we have come to rely on him and to serve his person. Sometimes we are even hesitant and timid.”²¹ And finally, the report blamed the existence of the Hồ cult on Vietnam’s feudal past. “The influence of feudal thinking, of the small producers, of the patriarchal system remains in our heads.”

As for Thành, in his concluding statements for the party meeting (printed next to Resolution 9 on the front page of *The People*), he mentioned the personality cult: “We need to consider all aspects when we judge comrade Stalin. Comrade Stalin made an enormous contribution to the revolution, but he also committed serious mistakes.” With respect to the situation in the DRV, Thành wrote:

We need to recognize that the cult of personality does exist to some extent inside and outside the Party. Though it has not created any serious damage, it has still limited creativity and the proactive spirit of party members and the people.

From the central committee down to the grassroots level, that phenomenon exists.

In order to address the cult of personality, what is mostly needed is education. At the same time, we also need to elevate the role of the Party, the collective, and the people.²²

Thành's closing remarks to the Central Executive meeting were published in *The People* and in the party's recently established theoretical journal, *Study*. In both cases, though, these remarks contained no byline—obviously this was done purposely on Thành's order. It is only through the *Party Documents* series and *Hồ Chí Minh's Collected Works* that we learn of his authorship.

Thành's Hagiographic Hồ Chí Minh Biography

At some point in early-1956, the party leaders had decided to release a new edition of Thành's (self-written) biography of Hồ Chí Minh, *Glimpses of the Life of Chairman Hồ*. This new edition was completed in August 1956—about five months after the CPSU 20th Congress. Had he agreed with Khrushchev's warnings about the negative consequences of personality cults, Thành might have delayed the rerelease of this hagiographic biography or possibly have removed its most egregious cult-building elements. Comparing the 1955 and 1956 versions of the book, though, we see no attempt to tone down the self-praise. Once again, in the new edition's early framing plot, the fictitious biographer of Hồ Chí Minh describes the difficulties he faced in trying to enlist the DRV leader's help:

The first time I met Him, I had the sense that He was like a teacher in the countryside.

I walked into his room and said hello. The Chairman stood up, shook hands with me, and invited me to sit before his desk. Before anything, He asked after my parents and only after that asked, "How may I help you?" I explained clearly my goal. The Chairman listened carefully. After I had finished speaking, He chuckled and said:

"A biography. That's an interesting idea. But right now, there is more important work that needs to be done. Many of our countrymen are hungry and suffering. After 80 years of slavery, our country has been devastated—now we have to rebuild it. We should work on these pressing tasks first. With respect to a biography of me . . . we can turn our attention to that in due time."

It was as though I had come up against a brick wall. But I was not disappointed.

Afterward, I came up with another plan: The direct approach, in other words, speak directly with Chairman Hồ in order to get material, did not

work. After thinking carefully, I realized that that method could not but fail. A person like our Chairman Hồ, with his modest, selfless character, and during a time when He was busy with so much work, how could I possibly get Him to talk about his life with me?²³

The many cult-building elements of Thành's *Glimpses of Chairman Hồ* remained. One simple adjustment would have been to de-capitalize the pronoun "He" (*Người*) in the biography and to stop this practice generally in the DRV. Thành obviously did not desire such a change. Especially on the biography's final pages, he laid it on thick:

When He reads the letters sent to Him by children, the revolutionary's determined eyes light up with happiness. Those letters are written very innocently and honestly. For example:

"Dear Uncle Hồ, we know how to read and write, and we wash our faces more carefully than before. We play happily. Uncle Hồ, Uncle—come visit us! We kiss you a thousand times, etc. etc."

The Chairman never thinks of himself. He only thinks of others and of the people.

The people love Chairman Hồ because of His plain-spoken personality and His pure heart. He is completely honest. He explains complicated problems in a simple manner so that everybody clearly understands.

Everybody loves Chairman Hồ, especially young people.

On the battlefield, when soldiers surge forward, they shout out loud: For the Fatherland and for Uncle Hồ, onward!

Because of Uncle Hồ, workers in factories and farmers in fields raise their productivity.

With children, the name Uncle Hồ is like a good luck charm. One only need mention Uncle's name and children immediately behave themselves.

About Chairman Hồ there are many other stories—they could be written in small books, turned into songs and poems.

A few stories told here are enough to show the Vietnamese people's reverence for Uncle Hồ.

A small photograph of Him in Hanoi was bought by a compatriot for 1,300,000 Vietnamese *đồng*.²⁴

Thành's determination to preserve the Hồ cult seems to have been unshaken by the CPSU 20th Congress. Indeed, the chaos that resulted from Khrushchev's dismantling of the Stalin cult may have made Thành and the Politburo more

determined than ever to protect their own leader cult. On that front, there was still work to do.

Protecting “Uncle Ho” and the DRV Regime from the Land Reform

A second, and arguably more significant, threat to the Hồ cult was the land reform’s violence and injustice. In his handling of this challenge, Thành and the Politburo appear to have followed the damage-control blueprint developed by Communist leaders for Stalin’s crimes. Nguyễn Huy Tường’s diary provides a sense for the land reform stories swirling around Hanoi during the summer of 1956, shortly after the campaign’s conclusion:

July 7, 1956:

Wave five of the land reform should have made the people enthusiastic but instead has brought about enormous grief. So many people unjustly punished. It’s extremely painful to consider those comrades who had contributed to the resistance war, who had risked their lives, who had lived in the trenches, and who were then brought out and shot. There were people who, following the Central Committee’s directive, signed papers for people to migrate to the South and then found themselves brought out and abused—there is no word of an apology, no justice. There were people with a badge from Điện Biên Phủ. Then comes the land reform—the head of the land reform team rips off the soldier’s medals, puts him in prison, and beats him. There were people who had been given a shirt from Uncle [Hồ]—the land reform cadres ripped it off and accused the person of pretending, of being a spy. . . .

August 5, 1956:

We must admit one thing: we have many times been cruel to the people, with comrades trampling all over those timeless aspects of human life that cause people the most pain: love of one’s parents, love of one’s siblings, love between husband and wife. A father dies in [the province of] Hà Đông—a family member requests a death certificate and has to wait three days. Of course they are resentful!

August 26, 1956:

A story about an older woman. She had great prestige in her village, taking care of everybody. During the mass mobilization for rent reduction, she challenged anyone to disrespect her. But when the land reform came, she

was picked as a target for struggle. A youth in the village took her rice and hit her. She died. Doesn't get any more inhumane than that.

September 5, 1956:

A person under investigation [during land reform] has hand burned. Brutal torture. Force brother to denounce brother, wife to denounce husband, child to denounce father, friend to denounce friend. Hike up the estimated crop yields. The lack of humanity is horrific, creating a dangerous hatred.

The father of Phạm Ngọc Khuế was imprisoned and died. His 75-year-old mother was forced to do reform labor. The children of landlords are given bad land and have their yield estimates hiked up. They can't produce enough to pay the tax. They go to gather firewood and are not permitted. Go to catch shrimp and crabs—can't do that, either. There are children who die. What is terrible is that there is not sympathy for young kids—their parents are brought out for struggle and they are brought out to watch. . . .

Land reform cadres who achieve results, quickly promoted to [Land Reform] Brigade leader. . . . They fabricate stories in order to arrest people. They miss their target. Then arrest. In order to show their zeal, they take the difficult subdistrict—in the end, they discover all [spies and cruel despotic landlords], arrest many reactionaries, etc. etc. In Thái Bình, after receiving the Central Committee's order to fix their mistakes, the Land Reform Brigade leaders change the order. Those people wrongly accused, wrongly punished, deserve an apology and the restoration of their positions. Yet the Brigade makes these people apologize to the peasants and thank the Party for its mercy, etc. etc.

Incorrect investigation: One woman was accused of being a spy for France when she was twelve years old.

September 10, 1956:

The peasants are afraid of the land reform because the estimated yields and acreage of fields are hiked up. (In the province of Bắc Ninh, it was raised 9,000 meters.) There are people who refuse land, even landlords.

The atmosphere of suspicion, of horror, of desolation. The land reform teams don't dare enter subdistricts. Those with children or siblings killed demand the return of the land reform team to carry out revenge. There was a team that tied the father of one person to a tree and shot him. Now his children request that they be allowed to do the same to the land reform team.

September 30, 1956:

During the land reform. A young couple love each other out in the field. The land reform team sees it and calls it a scheme of sabotage. In the end, the team fabricates a case against them as spies. The couple admit that they are reactionaries, but they do not dare to admit that they love each other. The land reform team kills them.²⁵

To protect the Hồ cult from the contagion of the land reform, Thành first and foremost had to distance “Uncle Hồ” from the campaign. He had to pretend that he and the Politburo, instead of having bullied the mass mobilization apparatus into meeting wildly exaggerated landlord quotas (5.68 percent of the population), had been unaware of what was happening. A problem with this narrative was the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of letters and appeals apparently sent to Thành by people during the three-year campaign. A June 29, 1956 directive suggests a couple of strategies that Thành adopted to distance Hồ Chí Minh from the campaign:

From before up until now, and especially after the establishment of peace, there were many personal and unit appeals sent to Chairman Hồ asking him to consider things that were of concern to these people. The number of petitions became greater and greater with every passing day, with one month seeing over 80 letters. Among these, the majority were appeals for [Chairman Hồ] to reconsider cases of injustice during the land reform or during the [Party] reorganization. There were letters from Party members, and there were also many petitions sent by fellow countrymen from all classes.

There were a few petitions of a provocative character sent by saboteurs. However, most petitions were inspired by local offices of mass organizations, the government, and the party having handled affairs in a way that was not yet truly appropriate. And there were also incidences of [these offices] handling things incorrectly or, having handled the thing correctly, not explaining the move carefully, resulting in the current concerns.²⁶

First, the directive strongly insinuated that the “injustices of the land reform and of the party reorganization” stemmed from mistakes committed by local-level offices rather than from Hồ Chí Minh’s policies. Second, the directive attempted to generate a convincing narrative of those letters and petitions not having reached Chairman Hồ:

In order to resolve those appeals, according to a directive of the Central Committee, a branch has been established in the Office of the National Chairman, which has the following responsibilities:

Promptly investigate these appeals, put forward the ideas in them to Chairman Hô for consideration and discuss a method of resolution with the responsible offices and localities in accordance with each incident.

Keep track of the way each office and locality resolves the problem. Because it wants the newly established National Chairman Office to carry out its responsibilities, the Central Committee has sent this message to Party executives at all levels, asking them to pay attention to the following things:

1. When you receive a petition sent to Chairman Hô, it needs to be transferred quickly to him along with the thoughts of the respective office or locality.
2. You should work closely with the National Chairman Office in order to investigate and resolve the appeals such as by doing the following: recruit a cadre to go and investigate the area where the incident happened; push the responsible offices that fall within your jurisdiction in their efforts to solve the problem; report the results of these cases to the Presidential Office; and provide help to cadres of the Presidential Office sent to your locality to work [on these problems], etc.
3. Pay attention to promptly resolving petitions sent to your level so that people do not have to appeal to Chairman Hô.

This is important political work; if implemented well, it will make the different classes of the people believe more in the Party, in the Government, and in Chairman Hô, contributing to the implementation of the Party and Government's policies.²⁷

Having established that Chairman Hô was unaware of what had been happening during the land reform campaign, the path was clear for his overall assessment of the campaign and its "errors."

About six weeks later, on August 18, Thành published his official "Hô Chí Minh" assessment of the campaign on the front page of *The People*. As with the aforementioned July 1 statement to land reform cadres, he began by stressing the positives of the campaign, characterizing it as a "great victory." Again, the reason for such a victory was the "Party and Government's correct policy, the powerful strength of working peasants unified in struggle, the zealous support

of the army and the people, and the spirit of sacrifice and effort of the cadres.” After congratulating DRV peasants on their “victory,” Thành moved to the issue of “mistakes”:

The land reform is a class struggle against feudalism, a revolution that moves the heavens and shakes the earth. It is fierce and intense. Moreover, because the enemy carried out mad acts of sabotage; because a number of our cadres had not yet grasped fully the policies and did not follow the correct mass line; because the Central Committee and Government’s leadership of the campaign lacked concreteness in some aspects; and because there was a lack of inspection and supervision, weaknesses and mistakes occurred during the land reform. [For example, mistakes occurred] in the implementation of rural unity, in the attack on the enemy, in the Party reorganization, in the implementation of the agricultural tax, etc.

*The Central Committee and the Government have carried out a solemn assessment of these mistakes and weaknesses and have come up with a plan to resolutely fix them. The plan aims at unifying cadres, unifying the people, stabilizing the countryside, and pushing forward production.*²⁸

Three days later, Thành was apparently still concerned about building the case for Hồ Chí Minh’s and the party leadership’s unawareness of the land reform’s violence and injustices. On August 21, 1956, he published an article, “The Ideas of the Masses Must Be Respected.”

The responsibility of government and mass organization cadres is to *take seriously the criticisms and requests of the masses*. Cadres (or offices and mass organizations) that receive criticism must sincerely and openly carry out self-criticism and try to fix their mistakes. If the criticism is not truly correct in some aspect, it must be explained clearly so the masses understand. But whether the criticism is entirely correct or only partly correct, we must always *welcome the criticism of the masses*. We must absolutely not stifle criticism. We must remember that cadres of mass organizations as well as of the government, from top to bottom, are all the servants of the people, and we must respect the ideas of the people. Many cadres have tried to act in that correct way.

But there are still many cadres who do not act in that correct way. Here are a few examples:

Newspapers frequently publish the people’s criticisms. But many times, this was like “water off a duck’s back,” with the cadres, offices, and mass

organizations that received criticism just continuing to sit silently, not carrying out self-criticism, not publishing in the newspaper their self-criticism and promising to fix their mistakes.²⁹

In his article, Thành returned to the issue of letters and petitions in another apparent attempt to suggest how these might not have reached him and the other party leaders—that is, how it would have been possible for him and the Politburo not to know about the campaign’s “errors:”

There are even local cadres who, at their own convenience, opened up the letters that higher-ups have sent to the people, hesitating and handing that letter over to the people in a slow manner, or not handing it over at all but rather writing a response to higher-ups themselves (as was the case with the Administrative Committee of Đồng Minh subdistrict in Nam Ninh district). There are cadres who threatened the people because they sent letters to higher-ups (such as the vice-Chairman of Xuân Yên commune in Hà Tĩnh province).

To do this is to violate discipline: firstly, through opening the private letter of another person; and secondly, through covering up the ears and eyes of higher-ups, and muzzling the mouth of the masses. That mistake must stop.

One more thing that needs to be said: the right to criticize and the right to petition are the democratic rights of all citizens. When a person sends a letter, he must think carefully and express his ideas with sincerity. The person should write his entire name and address clearly so that the office that receives the letter can look into it. A letter that has no name and address has no value at all.³⁰

All these instructions about “sincerity” and the importance of putting one’s “entire name” on letters were written by Thành under one of his many pen names, “C.B.”

Protecting Uncle Hồ from Conditions of Quasi-Free Speech: The Nhân văn-Giai phẩm Movement (September to December 1956)

The sincerity of Thành’s claim to welcome open criticism from the masses was soon tested in Hanoi by dozens of disgruntled DRV intellectuals who participated in the Nhân văn-Giai phẩm movement. These writers, scholars, painters,

and musicians had long been frustrated by the party's tight and corrupt management of cultural life. As the scholar Hue-Tam Ho Tai points out, the possibility of "personal self-realization and the emancipation of the individual from the tyranny of the group and from ideological conformity" had been an important draw of revolutionary politics during the late-colonial period.³¹ The extraordinary conditions of war, the cause of national independence, and the military brilliance of the DRV leaders had led most of the regime's intellectuals, young and old, to accept party control over their artistic production and personal lives.

With the end of the war, though, the Nhân văn-Giai phẩm intellectuals felt that their sacrifices over the past decade had earned them a reprieve from this stifling treatment. They wanted Thành and Politburo to accept them as loyal, but independent, watchdogs who would help the DRV improve. The dominant theme of their publications was "democratic freedoms." These intellectuals were also genuinely frustrated with the poor quality of DRV intellectual production. It was obvious that party control had produced works of propaganda, not works of literature. Under party guidance, late-colonial cultural luminaries such as Xuân Diệu, Nguyễn Hồng, and Nguyễn Tuân had been unable to produce anything that matched the greatness of their pre-revolutionary works—this was despite having witnessed one of the most remarkable episodes in Vietnamese history. Many intellectuals were also upset by the violence and injustices of the recently concluded land reform. Indeed, one of the movement's main contributors, the legal scholar Nguyễn Mạnh Tường, would question the nature of a policy that adopted as a motto, "It is better to kill ten innocent people than to let one enemy escape."³²

In his description of Stalin's methods, Khrushchev indirectly criticized many of the same brutal methods employed in the mass mobilization campaign, emboldening Nhân văn-Giai phẩm participants to demand change. One of the movement's most charismatic leaders, Nguyễn Hữu Đang, called for the DRV state to move away from a party dictatorship and establish a law-governed society:

During the Land Reform, the arrest, imprisonment, and investigation (using brutal torture) of people followed by sentences of imprisonment, execution, and property confiscation were done in an extremely sloppy manner. The same was the case with the policy of putting landlord families (or, in many cases, peasant families that had been incorrectly labeled) under siege to the point of making their innocent children starve to death. These were not entirely the result of poor leadership—they were also the result of not having a proper legal regime.³³

In the following issue of *Humanity*, Đàng published a front-page article titled, “How Do the Vietnamese Constitution of 1946 and the Chinese Constitution Guarantee Democratic Freedoms?” From the DRV Constitution, he quoted Article 10: “Vietnamese citizens have the right to freedom of expression, freedom of publication, and freedom of organization and assembly, and freedom of movement inside and outside the country.” Đàng pointed out that the failure to give citizens these rights promised in the 1946 Constitution could lead to troubles for the DRV similar to those recently experienced by the Communist regimes in Poland and Hungary.³⁴ Here Đàng was referring to Poland’s Poznan protests in June and Hungary’s anticommunist uprising from October 23 to November 11.

Nhân văn-Giai phẩm and the Personality Cult

The issue of how writers “deified” (*thần thánh hóa*) Hồ Chí Minh was first raised publicly in April of 1955 by the feisty young DRV intellectual (and future Nhân văn-Giai phẩm leader) Lê Đạt. In a tough review of a poetry collection published by Tố Hữu, one of the regime’s most powerful (and resented) cultural officials, Lê Đạt opined: “In my opinion, this poem suffers from the disease of leader veneration bordering on feudal deification so common among us.”³⁵ Thus, the idea that the DRV had a Hồ Chí Minh personality cult and that the cult had a “feudal” character antithetical to Marxism-Leninism had existed among DRV intellectuals long before Khrushchev’s secret speech. One can imagine how the CPSU 20th Congress’s strong stand against personality cults must have electrified Lê Đạt and other DRV intellectuals who shared his view about the “deification” of Hồ Chí Minh.

It is surely no coincidence that the editors of *Humanity* included on the front page of their first issue a passage from Thành’s 1947 book, *Fix the Way of Working*, which he had published under the pseudonym “X.Y.Z.”³⁶ That book described the proper behavior of party members.³⁷ Thành had released a second book, also under the pseudonym “X.Y.Z.,” which was titled *Bitter Medicine Cures the Disease: Speak the Truth and Offend Somebody* in November of 1950.³⁸

Introducing Thành’s passage on self-criticism, the *Humanity* editors explained, possibly with a hint of facetious contempt: “You have read the books *Change the Way of Working* and *Bitter Medicine Cures the Disease*, etc.; probably you also know that Mr. X.Y.Z. is a ‘public-spirited and selfless’ person who always speaks the truth, speaks directly, and speaks it all. We introduce to you one of his passages on criticism.” From Thành’s book, *Humanity* printed a twenty-eight-line passage, the opening lines of which stated:

There are cadres who think that: if I openly criticize my shortcomings, it will be harmful because:

The enemy will exploit it to counter our propaganda.

It will reduce the prestige of our organization and regime.

It will cause a loss of face for the Cadre who had that shortcoming.

Only carrying out general criticism internally is enough.

To think in that way is to misunderstand. To think in that way reflects a person who is sick and fears medicine. To think in that way is to not understand the meaning and power of criticism.

Humanity's publication of the passage directly challenged Thành to get on board with the spirit of the CPSU 20th Congress and to live up to his own words. He had put these DRV intellectuals through the bizarre and demeaning experience of "thought reform." Now it was his turn to "walk the walk" and carry out some self-criticism or at least tolerate some criticism from below. Had they not known it already, these DRV reformers would soon learn that "criticism and self-criticism" was meant for party underlings, not for the party leaders. It was about power and control, not about democracy, reform, voices from below, or truth.

If this bold initial engagement with X.Y.Z.'s (i.e., Thành's) ideas about criticism had made Thành nervous, he must have been relieved by the cautious approach intellectuals of the Nhân văn-Giai phẩm movement took in their discussions of the cult of personality. For the most part, they limited the term to their own leaders in the field of culture. The clearest challenge to the regime's conceptualization of the personality cult was the intellectual Trương Tũu's article in the second issue of the literature journal *Masterworks*. In his article "The Personality Cult in the Literature and Arts Leadership," Tũu wrote:

The cult of personality is a common disease among the literature and arts leadership in our country. And it has caused considerable damage in the field of culture. I am saying that [the cult of personality] is a common problem in the literature and arts leadership. I am not saying that it is a problem among rank-and-file writers and artists. The reason is that, in the past as well as today, *intellectuals who have self-respect never accept the cult of personality*. Art is creativity and freedom. The cult of personality is blind veneration and slavery. Those two things are like fire and water; if we have one, we cannot have the other.³⁹

Tũu went on to argue that writers and artists had been fighting against the cult of personality among the literature and arts leadership since back in 1948. At

that time, the painter Tô Ngọc Vân had debated with Trường Chinh topics related to the fine arts. Notably, Chinh had strongly denounced Picasso and cubism as “reactionary.” In words that must have made Chinh burn, Tữu recounted that DRV “artists met with each other, discussed the issue, and came to the collective conclusion that Trường Chinh, because he knew little about art, had come to an incorrect conclusion about cubism.”⁴⁰

In mid-December, Thành and the Politburo, possibly emboldened by Khrushchev’s November invasion of Hungary, shut down these independent and reform-oriented periodicals. As Peter Zinoman shows, Thành and the party leaders framed this undemocratic move as a democratic response to the demands of the people—in December, DRV newspapers printed letters from people expressing alleged outrage over the Nhân văn-Giai phẩm publications and demanding that they be shut down.⁴¹ That ended the discussion on personality cults and any semblance of civil society in North Vietnam. It also ended the possibility of a public discussion of the land reform’s high politics.

Over the ensuing decades up to today, Vietnam’s party leaders would permit historians and novelists to mention the land reform and, especially after 1986, to describe its ill effects at the local level. However, a condition of these depictions, enabled by the party’s control over all publishing in the country, has been that they not overtly challenge the official narrative of the campaign’s high politics. That official explanation was introduced in its most complete form by Võ Nguyên Giáp in his October 29, 1956 “Speech to People of the Capital.” The speech was published in *The People* two days later, taking up over thirteen full-length columns of the newspaper.⁴²

Two words in Giáp’s speech are of paramount importance. The first is “error” (*sai lầm*), which the party leaders introduced as an orthodox euphemism for the violence and injustice of the campaign. To call the actions of cadres “errors” or “mistakes” was to suggest that they were departures from what the party leaders had expected and desired. The second key word was “discovered” (*phát hiện*). As Giáp stated in his speech, “From April of this year, when we discovered the errors, the Politburo released a directive that was the first step toward fixing them.” One can see from Giáp’s statement how “errors” and “discovered” worked together to promote the idea that Hồ Chí Minh and the Politburo had not intended for the mass mobilization campaign to have the high levels of violence and injustice that it did.

Thành bolstered this “errors-discovery” narrative with two additional moves. One was to carry out a “correction of errors” campaign during which some of the wrongs suffered by land reform victims (those still alive) were to be addressed.

Another was to orchestrate wrist-slap demotions for four party leaders closely associated with the campaign: Trường Chinh (general secretary), Lê Văn Lương (head of the Party Organization Bureau), Hoàng Quốc Việt (head of the People's Mobilization and Fatherland Front), and Hồ Việt Thắng (vice-head of the Central Land Reform Committee). The idea was that these four would bear the brunt of official blame for the land reform. In his "Speech to People of the Capital," Giáp described the mass mobilization apparatus as a rogue organization that had operated outside normal party and government institutions. While this was true, Giáp implied that this independent status of the mass mobilization apparatus had been an unintended and unfortunate development—something that just happened. (In fact, the Politburo, working with Chinese advisors and following the Chinese mass mobilization model, had purposely structured the campaign's apparatus in this manner so that it could be unleashed on the party and state.) To further strengthen this "errors-discovery" narrative, Thành arranged for himself to replace Trường Chinh as party general secretary. The idea was that things had gone awry because Chairman Hồ had not been involved. Now he was stepping in to fix a problem supposedly created by others.

The year 1956 created dangerous conditions for the Hồ cult, one of the DRV's most important mobilization tools and an enduring feature of Vietnamese political life today. Through concealment, delayed reaction, subtle misdirection, and through Trường Chinh's willingness to play the role of scapegoat for the land reform, Thành and the Politburo were able to see the Hồ cult through Khrushchev's bloc-wide campaign against the cult of personality, through fallout from the land reform, and through a three-month period of semi-free speech in Hanoi.

Re-Stalinization and Collectivization: 1957–1960

The December 1956 crackdown on reform-minded DRV intellectuals and their subsequent dispersal from Hanoi to the countryside for various labor assignments began a process that might be referred to as “re-Stalinization.” By the beginning of 1957, Nguyễn Tất Thành and other party leaders seem to have found their footing after the challenges of 1956: Khrushchev’s de-Stalinization, land-reform fallout, Mao’s Hundred Flowers movement, Socialist-bloc convulsions in Poland and Hungary, the Nhân văn-Giai phẩm movement, and the Catholic revolt at Quỳnh Lưu.

The economic situation, however, continued to pose a severe challenge to the regime. In mid-1957, the Politburo assessed the situation as “growing more critical by the day.” DRV tax collection continued to “suffer dramatic shortfalls.” And “speculation and hoarding” continued to “grow more serious.” Because the DRV state still needed to purchase rice at “fixed-prices,” which is to say, at much less than market price, peasants were no doubt desperate to sell to any buyer other than the state. As the party leaders described it, “The free market is expanding and strongly resisting our control of it, resisting our management of the state, and resisting the leadership role of the national economy.” As happened in the Soviet Union during the mid-1920s, the desire of peasants to avoid selling to the state made it harder for the DRV regime to look after its bureaucrats and workers. This had “caused a decline in living standards among both workers and those who live off salaries. It has also created difficulties for our implementation of the 1957 state plan. The political effect of this has not been good.”¹

To inspire DRV citizens to overcome these difficulties, Thành called on people to think of the first fourteen years of the Soviet revolution. Before an audience of “people’s representatives” in Haiphong, he reminisced about his experiences in the Soviet Union:

Men did not need starched collars and neckties; women did not need anything flashy. Vehicles only needed to be able to carry things; everything was channeled into construction first. And buying anything required a ticket—whether it be bread, meat, cloth, or shoes. Because of their spirit of sacrifice, their ability to endure hardship, their belt-tightening measures, and that particular way of organizing trade—speculation and hoarding disappeared.²

In his speech, Thành provided his audience with a preview of the “subsidy” (*bao cấp*) system that the party leaders were soon to employ in the country. Markets would be illegal, and the population would be provided with tickets for the purchase of basic goods such as rice, salt, meat, vegetables, cloth, and soap.

Re-Stalinization

The party’s “correction of errors” campaign, which was promised to the DRV people at the height of de-Stalinization in October of 1956, steadily lost steam in 1957 as Moscow and Beijing retreated from their more liberal policies of the previous year. The “corrections” included the rehabilitation of purged party members, the “appropriate” material compensation of “working peasants” who had had their property confiscated, and the reduction of agricultural tax levels, which had been uniformly raised during the campaign.³

The country’s flagging economic situation, however, surely ruled out any sort of comprehensive policy of compensation for victims of the land reform. In January, the party leaders announced internally that “the cultivation area of rice, cotton, and other agricultural products is, in many places, less than it was in 1956.”⁴

Rehabilitation of Purged Party Members:

In May 1957, the Party Secretariat, now officially under Thành’s guidance, released a directive titled, “On the Rehabilitation of Party Members from the Landlord and Rich Peasant Class Who Were Tried during the Rent Reduction and Land Reform.” The directive claimed that inspections in “a number” of subdistricts from the provinces of Hưng Yên, Thanh Hóa, and Nghệ An had revealed three “problems.” First, “the majority of these [rehabilitated] Party members had troubles with the peasants before the August Revolution and, since regaining their membership, did not have a correct attitude toward the Party.”⁵

Basically, the directive glossed over the fact that the class demarcation carried out during the land reform had been discredited as unreliable. By referring to

these purged party members as “landlords” and “rich peasants,” the directive signaled that the class assignments from the land reform were now to be considered mostly valid. “The masses are not in agreement with rehabilitating Party members from the landlord and rich peasant classes.” As the directive further explained:

Party members from the landlord and rich peasant classes have been educated by the revolution, but their class character has not changed much. If they remain in the Party, it will complicate the character of the Party’s organization. As for those people who have contributed to the resistance war, to the revolution, the Party already has a policy of accommodating them appropriately.

In the countryside after the land reform policy became clear, the class consciousness of the masses was promoted. If party members from the exploitative classes return to the Party’s ranks and return to leading the masses, the masses will protest. On the other hand, the exploitative class could easily use this opportunity to reestablish their position among the masses, hindering the correction of errors today and the implementation of Party and Government policies tomorrow.⁶

The last part of the directive instructed cadres working on the correction of errors campaign to re-purge party members who had been rehabilitated “against the wishes of the masses” or who were causing difficulties for the correction of errors. Showing the party leaders’ anxiety over this move, the directive told correction-of-errors cadres that “[b]efore purging them from the Party, you must explain clearly to them that not recognizing them as party members is correct.”⁷

Property Restitution or Compensation

Two weeks later, on May 23, 1957, the party Secretariat released another “correction of errors” directive. This clarified issues related to the restoration of property expropriated from suburban residents who had been “incorrectly” targeted during the campaign. The directive divided the property into three categories. The first was “tools of production such as sewing machines, water pumps, rice processors, looms, candy making cauldrons.” As the directive explained, “If these things are still present in the subdistrict, the people should be mobilized to return them. If these things have already been sold, explain to the original owner that he needs to accept the loss and not demand repayment.” The same policy was to be used for the second category, “consumer goods,” such as “bicycles, watches, ballpoint pens, electric fans, and record players.”⁸

For small owners and handicraft workers who had lost their means of production and were suffering “hardships,” the correction-of-errors cadres were to “mobilize peasants of the subdistrict to negotiate some degree of compensation.” If the peasants of the community no longer had the capacity to compensate the family, and the family were still in dire straits, having no way of earning a living, “the Government will help to some extent,” the directive explained.

The third and final category, “other property,” included “gold, silver, women’s cosmetics, cash, rice, agricultural produce, fish, etc.” The party directive ordered cadres to “mobilize the owner not to demand repayment.” And again, if the aggrieved owner had “lost too much,” the cadre was supposed to “mobilize the peasants to negotiate some degree of compensation so that the person could make a living.”⁹ We can see from these and other party directives that the DRV regime, which was entirely responsible for the land reform, took little material responsibility for the losses that people suffered.

Agricultural-Tax Yield Levels:

As we saw, an important component of the land reform campaign was the raising of agricultural yield levels in rural communities. Since the agricultural tax was calculated as a percentage of a field’s estimated yield level, the government could (theoretically) increase its rice intake by raising these estimates. In the latter half of 1956, the DRV leaders had promised peasants that these estimated yield levels, that is, tax levels, would be recalibrated. By September of 1957, the party leaders were backtracking on this promise as well:

With respect to the yield levels, many places have not yet adjusted these, or they were adjusted but not yet to the right level, either hurting our State budget or making the masses remain concerned. But the basic situation in places that underwent the adjustments is that the process was not led carefully and the masses not educated properly. Therefore, the yield levels are quite a bit lower than reality requires. These need adjustment so that the masses make a fair contribution and do not bankrupt the State budget.¹⁰

The consequences of that tax policy, combined with rumors of coming agricultural collectivization, which peasants correctly interpreted as a policy that would see them lose their land, were apparent toward the end of the year. In November, the party Secretariat released a directive titled, “Agricultural Production and the Spring Harvest of 1958.” It reminded party members that their “leadership of agricultural production for the upcoming May harvest was very

important.” The problem was a “tendency” of peasants these days to “reduce their area of cultivation, to ‘flip two bowls into one,’ to return their land and do other work (such as the land of Catholics who went South, the land left over from the correction of errors and the land reform).” Similarly, the November directive warned of “a number of people who received land during the campaign but now wanted to return the land and do some other type of more lucrative work.”¹¹

Rehabilitating Stalin

Khrushchev’s secret speech had humiliated Communist leaders around the world by affirming the truth of the generally accepted non-Communist view of Stalin as a brutal dictator. As the events of 1956 showed, open acknowledgement of Stalin’s crimes had an immediate destabilizing effect on the Communist bloc. How could the bloc tout the superiority of their system and the Soviet Union if it had been ruled for thirty years by a person like Stalin? As noted, the speech was especially difficult for Thành because of its focus on the period of the Great Terror, 1934–1938, which he had spent in Moscow, and because of its opposition to personality cults, which Thành had constructed around the character Hồ Chí Minh. In his secret speech, Khrushchev had pointed out how contrary a personality cult was to the ideals of Marx and Lenin.

For these reasons, it is not surprising that Thành and other DRV leaders were quick to rehabilitate Stalin when circumstances allowed. That moment came in the wake of the 1957 International Conference of Communist and Workers’ Parties, held in Moscow from November 14 to November 15. Thành and his new protégé, Lê Duẩn, attended the conference, which resulted in a joint rejection of the calls for reform that had bedeviled party leaders during much of 1956.

For Thành and other DRV leaders, the bold affirmation of Stalin’s greatness came at the Central Committee’s 13th Plenum, held a few weeks after Thành’s and Duẩn’s return from the conference:

In summary, the world and domestic situation for over a year now has taught us many important and profound things.

We must always stand firmly on the Marxist-Leninist position, the revolutionary viewpoint of the proletarian class, and clearly demarcate right and wrong. We should not take the CPSU 20th Congress’s criticism of comrade Stalin and become bewildered, uncertain, leading to suspicion even of the principles of Marxism-Leninism. For the CPSU as for us, comrade Stalin is always a great follower of Marxism-Leninism. His entire revolutionary contribution is great; his accomplishments are of a primary

character and his mistakes are of only a secondary character. Stalin's written works are still part of the Marxist-Leninist canon.¹²

But the 13th Plenum Report provided no explanation for why it was only of "secondary importance" that Stalin had ordered the arrest and execution of 98 of the Central Committee's 138 members in the period from 1934 to 1938. Why had Stalin promoted the use of torture to extract false confessions from thousands of innocent party members and Soviet citizens? And what was it about the Soviet system that had seemed to make it virtually impossible to stop Stalin from committing his crimes over a span of at least fourteen years? Thành and his comrades provided no explanation for why these and other questions related to Khrushchev's revelations were not legitimate topics for discussion.

Agricultural Collectivization 1958–1960

Implementing a system of collectivized agriculture in Vietnam had been a dream of Communist Party leaders since the 1930s. In those days, before these revolutionaries had seized power and carried out a war, agricultural collectivization probably appealed because it seemed morally superior and more modern than Vietnam's small-farmer system. Also, since the 1930s, collectivized agriculture had been the rural economic system of the Soviet Union, which held a mythic position in the minds of many revolutionaries.

In 1957, these original, idealistic motivations for collectivization were surely supplemented by two practical reasons that stemmed from the experiences of the past decade. First, the DRV regime's survival still depended on extracting a huge contribution from an unproductive rural economy. The difficulty of this task had tormented the party leaders throughout the war, frequently jeopardizing the military effort. The reality was that peasants would not voluntarily boost production just to serve the war effort or to build socialism. Land redistributions carried out during the years of war had done nothing to stem the decline in production. Thus, there was no practical basis on which to conclude that land reform would solve this problem.

Second, the regime still had no means of earning the quantity of money needed to achieve its ambitious economic and political goals: industrialization of the economy and military defeat of the rival regime in Saigon. Thus, the DRV was heavily dependent on Soviet-bloc aid. Because that aid could only be demanded in the name of proletarian internationalism, the DRV needed to present itself as the model student of the Soviet Union and China. This meant dutifully

following in Moscow's and Beijing's footsteps. Not to undergo collectivization was to challenge the wisdom of Soviet and Chinese leaders and to question the superiority of the Soviet system.

In December 1957, the party leaders explained that "Consolidating the North and gradually constructing socialism" was one of the regime's three essential tasks. The meaning of "gradually" was not explained. At the end of 1955, the DRV leaders had invested in six "large" collective farms and ten "small" ones. These test collective farms were supposed to be carefully nurtured and generously supported so that they could succeed and generate popular excitement about collectivization. In March 1957, the party leaders held a conference devoted to assessing the results of these sixteen collective farms. In typical fashion, the leaders of the conference produced a lengthy report (forty pages), which was probably read to attendees. The report provides a window into what the party leaders had learned about collective farming in Vietnam before pushing forward aggressively with this transformation in late 1958.¹³

The Ministry of Agriculture had invested into these sixteen collective farms 60 percent of its development budget, a quantity that was "enough to construct two light-industry factories." The sixteen state-run farms employed a total of 8,500 "cadres and workers." After a year of operation, despite being generously supplied with the latest Soviet-bloc farm equipment, fourteen of the sixteen farms were operating at a loss. The two earning a profit were an orange farm and a coffee farm.

The collective-farm crop that was most likely to affect the everyday lives of Vietnamese peasants was rice. Unfortunately, despite the provision of Romanian tractors and other farm machines from the Soviet Union, debt from rice production comprised over half the total debt accumulated by the sixteen farms. According to the report, "Generally speaking, the collective farm work generated many losses for the Nation."

The report also discussed the effect of the collective farms on both the people working in them and on the local people living in surrounding areas. "Generally speaking," the farms had an intrigue factor. Many peasants were fascinated by the Romanian tractors and other modern farm equipment. To these local residents, working for the state farm held great appeal. As the report explained, "one easy-to-understand reason is that the collective farm is operated by the Government." It was obvious to outsiders that, for collective farm members, their livelihood was guaranteed by the government and not dependent on what was produced in the fields. Yet the report acknowledged that "we have not yet served as a model for the people in terms of our production organization and our

farming technique.” In some places, “our sloppy way of working has generated concern among our compatriots, who find our mistakes and weaknesses painful (for example, the waste of chemical fertilizer at the Thạch ngọc farm).”

From the perspective of the collective farms’ productivity, there were signs of serious trouble. Though the report explained in exhaustive detail the waste that accompanied the misuse and abuse of expensive farm equipment and supplies, it still concluded that the “biggest waste is in manpower.” The report described how “serious waste and corruption” characterized the work regime of the farms:

Extremely common is wasted work, with people arriving late and leaving early. And we have used 3 million days’ worth of pay on labor mobilized from people outside the collective farm. On an ordinary workday, losing only one hour of work would be unusually little. Therefore, the amount of wasted work amounts to 380,000 workdays, the equivalent of nearly 450 million Vietnamese dollars. Also, the number of non-working people in the farm is high, perhaps as much as 1,200 people during the last three months of the year. The amount of waste from this is over 100 million Vietnamese dollars during this three-month period.¹⁴

The report expressed grave concern about the extensive use of “mobilized manpower” (*nhân lực huy động*), which referred to non-collective-farm members who lived in the surrounding area. In parentheses next to “mobilized manpower,” the report clarified this term with the French word, “*corvée*,” i.e., forced labor. The extensive use of outside labor showed that the farms were not self-sufficient and were terribly inefficient, despite the DRV government’s generous provision of machinery. The outside labor “did not just help the collective farm with a particular job for one day but rather did work for the farm on a daily basis.”

And finally, the report expressed concern over the way the members of the state farm were treated:

When we throw out some new work task, we do so in a great rush to open new land, to plow the earth and plant crops, but we don’t think about the lives of the workers. Seize land in order to break it down—that is the initial situation in many places. Meanwhile, the workers have very little and live in cramped quarters. They work a lot and are helped little. Gradually, these workers see that we do business like the capitalists, of course not thinking about helping to improve the labor power of workers as is supposed to happen in a people’s democratic regime.¹⁵

Despite these warnings about the inefficiency of collective farms, the party leaders pushed forward with collectivization. Always anxious about the degree to which Soviet and Chinese Communist policies were being imposed on the DRV people, the party leaders again attempted to frame this policy as something that the people had demanded. Thus, in December 1958, when the Politburo decided that the time to push forward with collectivization had come, the party Secretariat released a directive stating that “the masses in many places are demanding that they be organized into agricultural collectives” and that the party had to “give special attention to the consolidation and development of the collectivization movement in order to satisfy the demands of the masses . . .”¹⁶

A directive released by the party Secretariat in February of 1960, however, suggested that the collectivization movement probably was not warmly embraced in many communities:

The process of carrying out a socialist revolution and building socialism is, at the same time, a complicated, tense, and decisive process of class warfare. We want to protect our revolutionary accomplishments and guarantee the effectiveness of our socialist reform and socialist construction. Therefore, the revolutionary regime led by the working class absolutely must severely repress any action of resistance carried out by counter-revolutionary forces. That is an essential responsibility of any country’s working class carrying out a revolution.¹⁷

Over the next two years (1959 and 1960), the party leaders would complete collectivization of the North. In typical fashion, the campaign required that party members write “general conclusions” about its strengths and weaknesses. Realizing that, from the perspective of agricultural productivity at least, the farms were not yet a success, the party leaders feared an honest appraisal. Thus, they released a “Draft Proposal for Guiding the Content of General Conclusions on the Movement to Mobilize Agricultural Collectivization Combined with the Completion of Democratic Reforms in Mountainous Areas.”¹⁸

What the party leaders wanted to avoid was having the policy of collectivization itself become a topic of discussion in these “general conclusions.” Therefore, while the “Draft” instructed cadres to report on the “results and remaining tasks” of the movement, the specific directions about how these were to be reported strongly suggested that the party’s policies were not up for discussion. Any bad results needed to be framed as a problem with “implementation.” The Draft put forward ten different work areas to be assessed, every one of which, in one way or another, provided a ready-made scapegoat for poor results.

The first category was “policy education and ideological mobilization,” for which the party leaders wanted local cadres to “assess and review the class consciousness and socialist consciousness of cadres, Party members, and the masses.” In other words, poor collective farm results could stem from a lack of class consciousness and socialist consciousness on the part of those involved. The second category was “Agricultural Collectivization.” The VWP leaders wanted the report to discuss “strengths and weaknesses in the implementation of policies . . .” The fourth category was the “consolidation and development of base organizations and the training of backbone cadres.” The fifth category, “boosting production,” called for a discussion of the “leadership of production.” The sixth category, “Order and Security, the Repression of Reactionary Saboteurs” called for a discussion of “implementation of the Central Committee’s [above-mentioned] Directive 186-CT/CTW, of 17/2/1960.”

The end of the directive reminded party members that the General Conclusions were to focus on “a location’s general leadership and command.” These were divided into two elements: (1) “understanding of the Central Committee’s policies” and “how that understanding was manifest in the implementation of those policies,” and (2) “The organization of implementation.”¹⁹ The entire exercise was carefully constructed to ensure that the results of collectivization were not the measure of the policy itself.

Completing the Totalitarian State

At some point between 1958 and 1960, the party’s leadership foursome of Thành, Trường Chinh, Phạm Văn Đồng, and Võ Nguyên Giáp came apart and lost their hold on power. Thành gradually retreated into semiretirement. Trường Chinh had not yet been able to recover his status after having been compelled to take most of the blame for the land reform. Phạm Văn Đồng remained prime minister, but his influence had diminished. As for Võ Nguyên Giáp, he remained secretary of defense, but his influence also declined as he increasingly came under attack from the party’s new leader, Lê Duẩn. According to historian Liên-Hằng Nguyễn, Duẩn was a man of “focus, administrative skill, and iron will.” He would inherit and preserve the Hồ Chí Minh personality cult as a mobilization tool for the regime.²⁰

Duẩn would do the same with the old Politburo’s collectivization project. By the end of 1960, he had placed roughly 85 percent of the DRV’s rural population into 40,422 collective farms. As the Vietnamese scholar Thái Duy explains, “in

addition to the method of mobilizing through persuasion, in many places, [cadres] used coercion, forcing peasants into collective farms.” The farms were based on the principle of “collectivized means of production and labor, centralized management, and unified distribution.” They would be a defining feature of Duẩn’s twenty-six-year reign.²¹

How did peasants gain access to the food produced by the collective farm? After the DRV state had taken its required amount, the collective farm’s remaining produce was distributed to members according to the principle of “work days.” Collective farm managers calculated a “work day” by assigning “points” to the different tasks carried out on the farm. Ten points equaled a “work day.” Each task, such as plowing, planting, and harvesting the collective crop, had certain criteria for measuring its completeness. If the manager of the collective farm determined that a farm member had completed a task according to standard, the member would receive a predetermined number of points.

As in the Soviet Union and China, collective farm members were allowed to keep for themselves roughly 5 percent of their original land. This small piece could be worked privately as in the past, and its yield was nontaxable. These family plots became vital to survival as the collective farm’s inefficiencies and inequities steadily reduced productivity. For example, when pulling up rice seedlings for the “family plot,” not a single stalk would be broken. When completing this task for the collective farm, such care was not necessary because work points were calculated by the pile. Whether the seedlings in that pile had been carelessly snapped in half and were thus useless was not part of the calculation.

Meanwhile, the collective farm officials held all the power in a village. They allotted themselves work points for attending meetings, studying, or visiting fields. As Thái Duy explains:

Laboring members of the collective lost the right to ownership and independence in production. Meanwhile, the power of cadres who held official positions in the collective was tremendous. They determined how many “work points” members earned and decided how each grain of rice would be divided among the community. Without the signature of a local official, regular members of the collective and their children could not enter the Party, mass organizations, schools, or educational institutions. Without the collective farm official’s signature, members could not leave the village to carry out work. And this was a weakness of these farms that cadres of poor character used to pressure and exploit the people.²²

During the period from 1961 to 1965, DRV collective farms opened up about 200,000 hectares of new land, but agricultural productivity fell dramatically enough to offset this expansion. The cost of production began to rise, and the effectiveness of state investments steadily declined. According to official statistics, the average amount of rice distributed each month to collective-farm families in 1961 was twenty-four kilograms. By 1964, that amount had fallen to an average of fourteen kilograms.²³ Mobilization for war surely played a role.

Despite the failure of these collective farms from the perspective of productivity, the party leaders pushed forward with the system. Economics was not the only motivation. Pride was a factor. The party leaders had staked their reputations on the superiority of the socialist system. To acknowledge that the collectivized economy was a failure was to acknowledge that three decades of revolutionary belief, often expressed in a tone of shrill contempt for doubters, had been misguided. To abandon collective farms was to abandon the socialist dream.

A second factor was the desperate need for Socialist-bloc military, financial, and moral support, particularly from the Soviet Union and China. In the Soviet case, this aid could only be demanded on the grounds of proletarian internationalism. With Mao, DRV leaders could tout the benefits of a strong socialist ally on his southern border, acting as a buffer against capitalist-bloc encroachment. The DRV leaders could also offer Mao prestige by following his revolutionary blueprint, helping to bolster his claims to be the leader of the Communist bloc. For the DRV leaders, the need for Soviet and Chinese support was an enormous disincentive to deviate from a sacred Socialist-bloc policy such as economic collectivization.

A third factor was the leverage that collective farms afforded the DRV state over the North Vietnamese people. The virtual elimination of private property in the countryside weakened people's position vis-à-vis the state, making resistance to government policies more difficult. The lack of private property also raised the stakes for officials at all levels. There was no viable private economic sector to join if a person were expelled from officialdom, making the cost of losing an administrative position a steep one.

Some of the leverage that the state gained from collectivization came as an indirect byproduct of measures needed to keep the collective farms afloat. For example, the presence of free markets where agricultural goods could be exchanged at actual value would always tempt peasants and officials to bypass the state system. To ensure that the DRV state was the primary buyer and distributor of agricultural products, the regime had to eliminate existing markets and stop new ones from emerging. Small local markets for exchange, often by barter,

between members of the community, were acceptable. But larger markets that could compete with the state were not. To prevent such markets from emerging, the DRV regime constructed hundreds of inspection stations along major roads. These functioned to interdict peasants attempting to transport and sell large quantities of agricultural products in another region.²⁴

The viability of collective farms also depended on people remaining in their villages to work their local farm, especially during the key periods of sowing and harvesting. If people were able to move freely from one location to another, the labor needed for the local farm would be uncertain. Thus, local party leaders were able to use their control over the collective farm food supply (and the threat of its withdrawal) to limit people's movement.

These ways in which the DRV state intervened in people's lives to protect the socialist economy also benefited the regime's mobilization of human and material resources for war. Indeed, many of the above measures taken to ensure the survival of collective farms had already been put in place to facilitate the DRV's war effort against the French and the State of Vietnam. These include such things as the implementation of an internal passport system (*hộ khẩu*), attempts to prevent peasants from selling agricultural goods to buyers other than the DRV state, efforts to take inventory of the DRV food supply available for the war effort, and various campaigns to put agricultural production in the hands of local officials. The need to protect and nurture the collective economy, built primarily during a time of peace, provided a moral and ideological justification for maintaining these wartime measures of social and economic control.

One of the great strengths of DRV leaders such as Thành, Chinh, and Duẩn was realism about collectivization's appeal to peasants. In mobilizing support among Southern peasants for the war effort against the Diệm regime, Duẩn followed Thành's lead by instructing party cadres to be discreet about the socialist future. As a former party cadre in the South explained to the scholar Jeffrey Race:

In this situation, the communists are very clever. They never propagandize communism, which teaches that the land must be collectivized. If they did, how would the peasantry ever listen to them? Instead, they say: "the peasants are the main force of the revolution"; if they follow the Party, they will become masters of the countryside and owners of their land, and that scratches the peasants right where they itch. But if the Party were to say: in the future, you will be a laborer, your land will be collectivized, you will no longer own any farm animals or buildings, but will become a tenant

farmer for the Party or the socialist state—if the Party were to say that, the peasants would not heed them. Thus, the peasants never think of the distant future of communism. Indeed, the Party cadres are instructed never to mention these things because, according to the teaching of Lenin, the peasant is the greatest bourgeois of all: he thinks only of himself. Say one word about collectivism, and he is already against you. This is a truth the Party has studied and learned to exploit.²⁵

Eventually, the truth of the “distant future” was revealed in the South as it had been in the North. After the DRV’s 1975 victory, would the economic policies of the victorious but poverty-stricken North be implemented in the defeated but wealthier South?

The pressures to do so were enormous. Any hesitation to implement socialist transformation in the South risked tacitly acknowledging the failure of these policies in the North and offending the Soviet Union—the party’s most important ally at this time. Second, the party leaders did not yet know any other way to rule. How could the Northern collective economy survive if there were markets and private enterprises in the South? How could the party seize desperately needed Southern rice if the region’s peasants were able to sell their produce in markets that actually paid for it? Thus, soon after the party’s 1975 victory, Duẩn sanctioned attacks on the capitalist economy. Within a few years, the Southern economy was in shambles, suffering from the same maladies (inefficiency, corruption, waste, lack of productivity, etc.) that plagued the North.

“Đổi mới” (1986) and the Dismantling of the Totalitarian State

By the early 1980s, the effort required to preserve the socialist economy was sapping the revolutionary vigor of Vietnam’s aging party leaders. As the scholar Benedict Kerkvliet shows, the will of Vietnamese peasants to push back against and undermine the party’s project of collective agriculture seems to have eroded the resolve of Lê Duẩn and the Politburo.²⁶ These leaders ruled a country beset by food crises, the mass exodus of hundreds of thousands of “boat people,” rampant inflation, widespread corruption, and many other serious challenges. Calls for reform began to grow and, indeed, more as a result of lapses in revolutionary vigilance than conscious policy, the reform process had already begun.²⁷

One cautious proponent of change was Trường Chinh. In 1981, Duẩn and Thọ had orchestrated for him to leave behind his position as National Assembly Standing Committee Chairman and assume the more influential position of

National Chairman. In 1985, Duẩn's failing health forced him to withdraw from many of his leadership duties as party general secretary. The Politburo nominated the reform-minded Chinh (not Lê Đức Thọ) to serve as the de facto party leader in Duẩn's absence.

In July 1986, Duẩn died of heart disease and Chinh, now 79 years old, was officially proclaimed general secretary. It must have been an emotional moment for him, returning to the position that he had been forced to abandon in disgrace thirty years earlier. Chinh would serve as general secretary for the remainder of the year until the party's Sixth Congress (held in December 1986). At that point, Chinh, Phạm Văn Đồng, and Lê Đức Thọ retired from official politics, serving as "advisors" to a new crop of younger party leaders who would continue Chinh's reform agenda.

During his brief return as general secretary, Chinh strongly promoted the reforms that he believed vital to the health of the country and to the survival of the party's regime. Justifying these reforms, which would soon be given the general name, *Đổi mới* (New Change), required summarizing the negative phenomena that threatened the country. This Chinh did in several policy documents produced during the months leading up to the Sixth Party Congress. The terms that Chinh and other party leaders used frequently to describe the ills of Vietnam's government and economic system were "bureaucratic centralism" (*tập trung quan liêu*) and "subsidization" (*bao cấp*). Both terms were products of the socialist system.

"Bureaucratic centralism" referred to the concentration of all economic decision-making in the hands of central state offices. The state owned and managed all legal business enterprises in the country. In this "command economy," a company's fundamental strategic decisions were determined by officials in high-level government offices. Thus, the on-the-scene manager of a company had little power to determine such basic things as how much raw material would be obtained for production, how many goods would be produced, the price at which goods would be sold, how many employees would be hired, and what salaries they would be paid. "Bureaucratic centralism" meant that local factory managers were not accountable for the quality of the goods that their factories produced. And the men and women in the government's high-level planning offices in Hanoi were not responsible for the decisions that they imposed on factories around the country.

Trưởng Chinh's second term, "subsidization," referred to the government's policy of setting the price of consumer goods lower than the actual market price. As happened in the Soviet Union and in other socialist countries, the policy of

subsidizing essential goods meant that demand far exceeded supply. Because prices were often set below the level needed to meet the costs of production, many companies operated in a constant state of insolvency. As a result, they needed to be propped up (or subsidized) by the government. A company whose existence did not depend on earning a profit had little economic incentive to operate efficiently or to produce competitive products. An important overarching goal of the “subsidy system” was the regime’s management of the population’s consumption habits in an environment of chronic scarcity and unyielding inflation.

As Chinh observed, “over the past five years, production has gone almost nowhere and labor productivity has declined while the cost of production has unceasingly grown—the economy and society grow more unstable by the day.”²⁸ Indeed, inflation during 1986 grew to over 700 percent. In another speech, Chinh explained some of the broad causes of Vietnam’s problems:

We have made mistakes due to “leftist infantilism,” idealism, and to the contravention of the objective laws of socio-economic development. These mistakes were manifested in the [emphasis given to] developing heavy industry on a large scale beyond our practical capacity . . . [maintaining] the bureaucratically centralized mechanism of economic management based on state subsidies with a huge superstructure which overburdens the infrastructure. As a result, we relied mostly on foreign aid for our subsistence.

Another cause of the country’s problems was corruption. Chinh noted the prevalence of officials who “make shady arrangements, steal goods, form nefarious partnerships, practice bribery, and abuse socialist property.” According to Chinh, what was “even more serious” was the tendency of officials to “use their power to repress and silence whistleblowers.”²⁹ It was the “legitimate right of citizens to voice criticisms in newspapers,” he stated, though, in an obvious qualification, remarked that this right needed to be “implemented in an orderly way.” Chinh lamented the lawlessness of society, but he avoided suggesting that the law be equally binding on party and nonparty members: “every Party member is equal before the Party’s law; every citizen is equal before the law.”³⁰

Within a narrative framework that still espoused the cause of socialism, Chinh acknowledged that the regime would now “use selected parts of the private capitalist economy.” While calling for the constant strengthening of the “collective economy,” Chinh stated that the party now “recognizes the role of petit-bourgeois production and the private capitalist economy, at a limited level for a relatively long time.” Ultimately, “bureaucratic centralism” and

“subsidization” were features of a totalitarian state, which is to say a state constructed to exert the maximum possible control (*total* control being impossible) over a nation’s economic, political, and social life. Chinh repeatedly called for the elimination of these two negative features but, to the disappointment of many Vietnamese intellectuals then and today, insisted on maintaining the party dictatorship.

After 1986, the party pushed forward with the dismantling of Vietnam’s collective economy in the countryside. The boost that this provided to agricultural production was immediate and enormous. In the early 1980s, Vietnam had been forced to borrow 770,000 tons of rice and grain from the Soviet Union to feed a population teetering on the brink of famine. By the early 1990s, Vietnam’s agricultural production had increased so dramatically that the country had become the world’s third largest rice exporter. While not without bumps along the way, Vietnam’s economic transformation since 1986 has been spectacular.

The dismantling of collective farms ultimately meant the dismantling of the party’s totalitarian state and its reestablishment as a merely authoritarian one. Instead of a state focused on mobilizing its citizens for “total war,” Vietnam’s state in recent decades has focused on economic development and regime preservation. In the eyes of Vietnam’s party leaders, that second focus continues to require that a few features of the old totalitarian state be maintained—notably, the Hồ Chí Minh personality cult, state ownership of all public media, and tight party control over ostensibly democratic institutions.

Conclusion

The DRV regime sits at opposite ends of two yardsticks of political legitimacy. The first is a military yardstick, which includes the ability to mobilize troops, to win battles, and to expel a foreign power. The second is a democratic yardstick, which includes the ability to win a free election, to survive in conditions of free speech, and to improve the material and spiritual wellbeing of the governed. When measured by the military yardstick, Nguyễn Tất Thành and his comrades succeeded spectacularly, but when measured by the democratic yardstick, they fell short in many ways. Were he asked privately to defend his record on the democratic front, though, Thành might have replied that the party's military goals never could have been achieved under "bourgeois democratic" conditions; and the goal of national independence, after eighty years of French subjugation, justified any means.

During and immediately after the period of the Second Indochina War, Western assessments of the DRV regime tended to rely mainly on its military successes. The battlefield was the only place Westerners encountered the DRV because journalists such as David Halberstam, Stanley Karnow, and Neil Sheehan were not allowed to live in and scrutinize North Vietnam. Thus, to a large extent, the success of the DRV regime had to be inferred from the performance of its outstanding soldiers. Battlefield victory and political legitimacy were strongly connected, especially in the thinking of Americans, who had never experienced military defeat leading to occupation. Histories of America's major wars tended to imply a link between military performance, the justness of the cause, and eventual battlefield success.

This mindset was something noticed by the German émigré scholar Guenter Lewy, a perceptive observer of American culture. Even some leaders of America's pacifist movement, Lewy observed, celebrated the DRV's military successes.¹ In his controversial 1978 book on the Second Indochina War, Lewy attempted to refute this connection between military performance and political legitimacy. (One can imagine how his experience as a Jew in 1930s Germany shaped his views of nationalism, the meaning of military prowess, and the question of American military intervention around the world.) Discussing the inferior performance

of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, he wrote, “As history demonstrates abundantly, there is, of course, no necessary connection between the efficiency of an army and the absolute value of the political ideas it serves. The outcome of a military contest has no moral significance.”² This was an idea singled out by the influential American historian of Vietnam, David Marr, as especially troubling and as having contributed to Lewy’s failure to draw the “necessary lessons” from the Second Indochina War:

More specifically, he rejects the importance of “abstract ideology,” arguing that there is no necessary connection between the efficiency of an army and the political ideas it serves. Because the German Wehrmacht and the French Foreign Legion fought well even in extreme adversity, he suggests that the Saigon army somehow could have done likewise—thus completely ignoring what he previously accepted was a revolutionary historical context in Vietnam.³

Judging from Marr’s writings on Vietnamese history, when he referred to “abstract ideology,” he meant nationalism. In his thinking, the Vietnamese Communist Party had seized the banner of Vietnamese nationalism in 1945 and had never relinquished it. Thành and his successors were able to recruit dedicated followers and motivate them to fight well because the cause of expelling foreigners and unifying the country was simple and just.

Nationalism was an important part of the party’s success. Thành and his comrades took pains to promote themselves as patriots and to denounce Vietnamese political rivals first and foremost as “traitors.” Only internally did the party leaders speak of rivals as being “anti-Bolshevik.” And the DRV regime obviously earned great nationalist credit for their victory over the French. But could that victory have been achieved without the party’s Marxist-Leninist ideology? I believe not. As the war against the French dragged on, Thành and the Politburo found that they needed coercion, sometimes reinforced by terror, to extract the necessary sacrifice from an exhausted population. Soviet and Chinese Communist precedents gave the Politburo a set of institutional mechanisms for that coercion and an ideology, Marxism-Leninism, to justify them.

Explaining the Mass Mobilization Campaign (1953–1956)

The party’s use of coercion and terror climaxed with the mass mobilization campaign from 1953 to 1956. Many scholars have attempted to explain this episode, which is arguably the most sensitive and controversial in the history

of Vietnamese Communism. In their studies of the campaign, Edwin Moise, Christine White, and Andrew Vickerman exhaustively analyze a 1968 history of the land reform produced by the DRV social scientist Trần Phương.⁴ His book provides many DRV statistics about the alleged class composition of the countryside as well as some of the alleged regulations of the campaign. The above scholars analyze those statistics and regulations with admirable care. Moise, for example, points out the inherent trouble in the land reform's redistribution policy, which stated that poor peasants were to receive enough land to raise their holdings close to the village's per capita average: "This was a very dangerous policy and must have been among the major causes of the errors and illegalities in the later stages of the land reform." As Moise sensibly points out, because of the "nature of an average," such a redistribution goal "would require major inroads into the holdings not only of the rich peasants but even of the middle peasants."⁵

One number, "5.86 percent," seems to be especially revealing about the nature of the mass mobilization campaign. That number was the Politburo's figure for the percentage of the population comprising the landlord class. First, it was fifteen times higher than the landlord percentage determined in a 1951 test census conducted in a "typical" district of Nghệ An province. Also, in their 1938 book, *The Peasant Question*, Trường Chinh and Võ Nguyên had stated plainly that, in Central Vietnam and Tonkin, "there are many villages that do not have landlords—their highest class is rich peasant."⁶ In other words, the landlord ratio of 5.86 percent was a wild exaggeration. Second, the use of the ".86" was obviously an attempt to disguise with pseudoscientific precision the arbitrary nature of the figure, which had been pulled out of thin (Chinese) air. Fourth, the number shows that the party leaders did not take seriously their class demarcation criteria since these should have obviated the need for landlord quotas. Fifth, the decimal ".86" signaled to mass mobilization cadres that they should err high on their landlord numbers—this is another reflection of the Politburo's fear that too few landlords would be found.

Ultimately, the figure 5.86 percent shows that the so-called errors of the campaign—the enormous number of regular villagers labeled as landlords—were not "errors" but an intended result. This is the conclusion reached by Georges Boudarel, Bertrand de Hartingh, Olivier Tessier, and Alex Thai Vo in their respective studies of the DRV. As de Hartingh wrote in 2003, "Nobody was ready to accept that the "mistakes" were not errors, nor that the cadres had acted exactly as asked to."⁷ I would use a stronger verb than "asked," though, to describe the Politburo's treatment of mass mobilization cadres—"pushed" or "coerced" to make "landlords" out of regular peasants strikes me as more realistic. The

method of compelling cadres to carry out “thought reform” before heading into their assigned village was especially effective. This involved having cadres confess to and often write down in an official dossier various preselected “sins against the revolution,” as one DRV writer described it.⁸ As Goscha notes, these mostly false confessions put land reform cadres in the weak position of having to “prove” themselves through vigorous attacks on the landlord class and through uncovering (nonexistent) Nationalist Party cells.⁹

In his classic historical fiction account of the land reform, appropriately titled *Nightmare* (Ác mộng), the former land reform cadre and writer Ngô Ngọc Bội has a memorable chapter titled “Landlord Ratio” (*tỷ lệ địa chủ*). In the chapter, the main character’s land reform team meets with their brigade’s “statistics” cadre. The problem is that their team has not found enough landlords in their assigned subdistrict of Quảng Hà. As their statistics cadre explains:

“According to the statistics, Quảng Hà has 1,240 families. On the basis of a landlord ratio of 6 percent, Quảng Hà must have 74.4 landlords. In the entire sub-district, we have only found 58, which means we are still short 16.4 landlords.” During the Brigade statistics meeting the other day, we complained that ‘6 percent landlords is too high for our country.’ The Brigade quickly sent our appeal to higher-ups. They reduced our landlord ratio to 5 percent. I heard a rumor that the ‘[Chinese] advisors’ did not agree, but that our higher-ups remained determined. If the ratio is 5 percent, then Quảng Hà is short exactly fourteen landlords. In other words, the sub-district needs to have seventy-two landlords. Compared with the 6 percent ratio, we are allowed to reduce our total by 2.4 landlords.”

The imposition of this unrealistic ratio guaranteed that most people targeted as “landlords” in the campaign would be regular community members. Many of the brutal aspects of the land reform, especially the use of torture to elicit confessions, stemmed from this dilemma faced by land-reform cadres.

Chinese Pressure

What was the role of Chinese pressure in the land reform? Thành’s original rural policy plan was to follow the orthodox Leninist model of the two-stage revolution. A radical attack on the landlord class and a large-scale redistribution of land to poor peasants would not happen until after independence had been won from the imperialist power, France. Reading between the lines of the party’s reports at their Second Congress in February of 1951, we see a concerted effort to justify a continuation of this classic Leninist two-stage approach. It appears that

the DRV's Chinese advisors began to promote land reform to their Vietnamese clients soon after arriving in northern Vietnam.

By 1952, the war had reached a point of stalemate. Desperate for military aid, Thành traveled to Moscow in October of that year to ask Stalin for more help. The Soviet leader told his Vietnamese guest, "Comrade Din," to stop delaying and to carry out land reform as the Chinese had been recommending. Thành complied with Stalin's order, which meant a sudden deviation from the long-held two-stage model. As we saw, Thành and Trường Chinh attempted to cover up the Moscow impetus for the policy change with some awkward explanations. In Chinh's case, the cover-up involved changing rural policy comments made in a 1951 speech so that they anticipated more strongly the new move to land reform. Given the amount of blood already spilled in the war, the economic difficulties faced by the DRV, and the desperate need for more aid, the pressure on Thành to accede to Mao's and Stalin's wishes by carrying out land reform would have been enormous.

I believe, though, that the DRV's victory over the French at Điện Biên Phủ in the summer of 1954 must have given Thành some breathing room in his relationship with the Soviets and the Chinese. Having become the best story of the Communist bloc, could the DRV be abandoned by Moscow and Beijing? Moreover, the Soviets and Chinese had wanted a result from the Geneva negotiations and had pressured Thành to accept less than satisfying terms. One of those terms guaranteed democratic freedoms for all Vietnamese and explicitly forbade any state-sponsored repression from either regime. Since the mass mobilization campaign contradicted both the letter and the spirit of the Geneva Accords, which Thành had been pushed to approve, I believe that he could have used those accords to justify delaying the campaign indefinitely. Thus, in the light of the currently available evidence, Thành's continuation of the land reform after the war seems to suggest true belief in the campaign as an antidote to problems in North Vietnam.

Mass Mobilization as DRV Electoral Strategy?

After Điện Biên Phủ and the Geneva Conference, did the land reform become a means of assuring electoral victory for the party leaders? Following the Geneva Accords, Thành and his comrades in the Politburo took measures to keep the campaign going but to conceal its nature from roving International Control Commission teams. And, as Alex Thai Vo points out, during the 300-day period of free movement following the accords, the Politburo kept the land reform away from coastal areas where people had the easiest route out of North Vietnam.

In this way, the campaign could be continued with less risk of the DRV being flagged for Geneva Accords violations and without encouraging more emigration to the South. Thành also called for a campaign of public complaint over repressive actions taken by their rival regime in Saigon, hoping to keep the narrative of Geneva Accords violations focused on the region below the 17th parallel, South Vietnam.¹⁰

Why did Thành and the Politburo stick with their policy of mass mobilization? In his 2003 book, de Hartingh describes the official DRV explanation of the land reform's "errors" to National Assembly members in December of 1956. At that time, the party leaders provided two reasons for what had happened. The first was the application in Vietnam of the Chinese experience. The second was the rush to finish the campaign before the proposed 1956 national elections—pushed to move quickly, cadres allegedly lacked the time to discern between friend and foe.

Intriguingly, de Hartingh argues that the proposed national elections were a motivating factor behind the land reform's violence. In his view, Thành and the Politburo feared that many Northerners might vote for the anticommunist leader of the South, Ngô Đình Diệm, "the election's other possible winner."¹¹ Since I do not believe that the DRV leaders viewed the elections as possible—Diệm explicitly rejected this measure—I disagree with de Hartingh's theory that the party leaders had "miscalculated" on the elections and that the land reform had evolved into a round of repression to ensure electoral victory. However, it is worth considering the measures that the party leaders were willing to take in their efforts to depict the land reform's violence as stemming from honest mistakes. Basically, as de Hartingh shows, the Politburo was willing to acknowledge openly that their approach to the "free elections" would have involved a campaign of mass repression to "strike out all elements it was not sure of."¹²

The Economic Justification

Did Thành and his lieutenants believe that "poor peasants," if only given land, would provide a great boost in agricultural production? In 1938, when Trường Chinh and Võ Nguyên Giáp wrote their book, *The Peasant Question*, they probably did believe this to be true. Fifteen years later, after seven years' experience managing the DRV economy, Chinh, Giáp, Thành, and other party leaders must have had doubts. The party's policy of temporary land redistribution, which had been carried out since seizing power in 1945, had yielded no promising results. According to the regime's own questionable statistics, over half the total "feudal landlord land" in northern Vietnam had already been distributed by the time

the land reform began in 1953. As the Vietnamese scholar Đặng Phong points out, during the land reform, only about a quarter of the total feudal landlord land was seized and redistributed.¹³

Similarly, there is no proof that poor-peasant soldiers at Điện Biên Phủ were more motivated to fight because of the promise of land reform, as is commonly asserted in official DRV justifications of the campaign. DRV soldiers appear to have fought no less bravely or effectively during the pre-land reform battles such as the 1950 Border Campaign, the Battle of Hòa Bình (1951), and the Battle of Nà Sản (1952).

Moreover, the ultimate goal of the DRV leaders was not a bustling small-farmer economy but one based on the large, modern collective farms of the Soviet Union. This, in their view, was the solution to the problem of agricultural production. Still, the land reform, in theory, was supposed to be a transitional phase that provided an economic boost. It would help lay the conditions of plenty in which the shift to agricultural collectivization would occur.

In his excellent article on the land reform, Olivier Tessier argues that the reform did have a “positive impact on production and on the living standards” of the DRV people. The evidence for this alleged production boost is DRV statistics that seem especially questionable. In 1954, the DRV government claimed that its total rice production was 2.5 million tons—in 1959, they boasted of having produced 5.19 million tons.¹⁴ Are we to believe the DRV claim that its rice production, despite the chaos of the land reform, the departure of 850,000 people, and the disruptions of land reform and agricultural collectivization, had more than doubled in only five years? Assuming that a boost had occurred, it may have resulted more from the cessation of war than from land redistributions. The rapid move to collectivization after land reform suggests that the party leaders, in reality, did not expect land redistributions to provide any meaningful productivity increase. I doubt one happened.

Winning Over the Poor-Peasant Majority?

Was the mass mobilization a campaign to win over the poor-peasant majority? In their public justifications, Thành and the Politburo claimed that this was the case. But three aspects of the land reform cast doubt on this justification. First was the fact that an important part of the campaign was the raising of agricultural-tax yield estimates. Redistributed land that was, in theory, supposed to win the hearts of poor peasants was accompanied by a tax so onerous that many peasants were reluctant to receive land. Second is, again, the party leaders’ rapid move to collectivization. Belief that providing land to peasants would win their support implies

that taking that land away would result in a loss of that support. The move to collectivization indicates that the party leaders placed little value on the peasant goodwill that land redistribution was supposed to earn for the regime. Third, most accounts of the land reform paint a picture of the campaign as a terrifying experience for the entire village—poor included. One of the tasks of the land reform cadres was to lead the crowd in cheers after a local member of the community had been shot as a “landlord.” Obviously, the DRV leaders felt that peasants could not be trusted to display the required joy of their own volition.¹⁵

In light of the available evidence, the most convincing explanation for Thành and the Politburo’s motivation in putting northern Vietnam through mass mobilization is that offered by the French Communist, Georges Boudarel. He worked for and lived in the DRV from 1949 until 1964. In his 1991 book on DRV intellectuals, Boudarel argued that the land reform campaign was “essentially political” and “aimed at the radical destruction of all potential oppositional forces more than at economic or social goals.” Pushing Boudarel’s explanation further, I argue that the mass mobilization campaign was, under the guise of class warfare, a massive and thorough round of terror imposed on the *entire* DRV countryside, including poor peasants.

“Awakening” the Northern People

Why did Thành and his comrades feel that such a campaign of repression was necessary? In tracing the party leaders’ internal directives during the war, we see a steady buildup of frustration over the difficulties in mobilizing the required contribution from people in the countryside. While recognizing the difficulties and disruptions caused by the war, Thành, Trường Chinh, and other Politburo members may have quietly raged over some actions of Vietnamese in the countryside. Why did many villagers attempt to hide their rice instead of willingly giving it to the DRV state? Why did some villagers attempt to sell their rice to the French when it was so badly needed by DRV soldiers? Why did so many Vietnamese peasants leave enormous areas of paddy uncultivated? How could these things happen when soldiers were suffering and dying on the battlefield to win the country’s independence? Why was tax collection so difficult? Why couldn’t villagers forget their local problems, pull together, and dedicate themselves entirely to serving the war effort? Why couldn’t local cadres motivate peasants to raise production? These questions are implied by many of the party’s internal directives over the course of the war.

It is possible that Thành and his lieutenants thought that too many people in the countryside had not yet fully “awakened” (*giác ngộ*) and committed

themselves to the cause of DRV victory. In his explanation of the land reform, the DRV historian Nguyễn Khắc Viện argued that, for poor peasants, the campaign was a form of “shock” treatment. It forced them to awaken, to develop a class consciousness, and to overthrow their local oppressors.¹⁶ I interpret the campaign as a type of terrifying “shock” treatment aimed at rural society in general.

The message was that nobody could stand outside of the party’s agenda. Nobody was safe. The state could make “spies,” “Nationalist Party members,” and “cruel despotic landlords” out of dedicated Communist Party members, courageous Điện Biên Phủ soldiers, loyal parents of DRV bureaucrats, and patriotic leaders of local DRV mass organizations. Similarly, no sacred institution such as the family, no source of village solidarity such as the local *đình* (meeting house), and no humane legal principle such as the right to due process could protect a person targeted in the campaign. Most of all, though, the campaign showed rural communities that the DRV state could make facts and truth mean nothing.

Knowing that agricultural collectivization would not be welcomed by most peasants—after all, Thành had lived in the Soviet Union from 1934 to 1938—he may have viewed this experience of terror and violence as a means of preparing the countryside to accept this radical change. Benedict Kerkvliet, in his history of agricultural collectivization in Vietnam, describes the process as a more peaceful one relative to that of the Bolsheviks in the Soviet Union. “Authorities in Vietnam rarely used brute force to herd people into cooperatives, punish those who broke rules, or confiscate their possessions.”¹⁷ I agree. But, after the land reform campaign’s elimination of local leaders, its pressure on community members to denounce each other, its destruction of local meeting houses and temples, and its spectacular public trials and executions, what was left of North Vietnamese rural society to resist collectivization?¹⁸

Completed by the end of 1960, collectivization fulfilled a dream held by party leaders since the 1930s and, by affirming the DRV’s membership in the Communist bloc, assured Soviet military and economic aid. It also solved mobilization problems that had arisen during the First Indochina War. As Trường Chinh had expressed in February of 1950, “During this period of intense struggle, we must announce that the people’s labor, property, tools, and materials are the Government’s to use. The Government has complete power to use [these things] to the benefit of the resistance struggle.”¹⁹ Collectivization made that totalitarian principle a reality by transferring virtually the entire DRV food supply directly into the hands of the state. Now the DRV’s rural population had to ask the state for rice instead of vice versa. This gave the party leaders tremendous leverage

over the rural population. Thành and his comrades had found during the First Indochina War that no amount of leverage could be too much in war.

The close chronological alignment between the completion of agricultural collectivization in the DRV and the party's move to "armed struggle" in the South (1960) deserves more appreciation. The problem of agricultural production and rice supply during the First Indochina War had placed severe pressure on the party leaders, threatening the viability of a promising war effort. They were determined that things would be different when they mobilized manpower and rice for the next war.

Introduction

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2 “Indochinese Communist Party” was the name for Vietnam’s Communist Party from 1930 until November 1945, when Hồ Chí Minh, for diplomatic reasons, pretended to “dissolve” the party. In February of 1951, Hồ put the party back on a public footing, this time under the name Vietnamese Workers’ Party (Đảng lao động Việt Nam). In 1976, the party leaders changed their organization’s name to The Vietnamese Communist Party (Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam).

3 The Vietnam Independence Alliance League [Việt Nam độc lập đồng minh hội] or the Vietminh front [Mặt trận Việt Minh].

4 “Chương trình Việt Minh” [Vietminh Program], *VKDĐT*, vol. 7 (1940–1945), 150.

5 Hồ Chí Minh, “*Tuyên ngôn độc lập*” [Declaration of Independence], *HCMTT*, vol. 4 (1945–1946), 4.

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9 Goscha, *Vietnam*, 63–66.

10 “Thông cáo” [Announcement], *Cứu quốc*, no. 37, September 7, 1945.

11 Marr, *Vietnam*, 364.

12 GF 3.

13 Marr, *Vietnam 1945*, 327.

14 *Ibid.*, 372–377.

15 *Ibid.*, 353.

16 Judy Stowe, “Money and Mobilization: The Difficulties of Building an Economy in a Time of War,” in *The Birth of a Party-State*, 61.

17 Goscha, *Thailand*, 204; Goscha, *Vietnam*, 283–319.

18 McHale, “Freedom, Violence,” 85. See also David G. Marr, “Beyond High Politics:

State Formation in Northern Vietnam,” in *The Birth of a Party-State*, 58–59; Tertrais, “L’économie vietnamienne,” 72.

19 Trần Thị Liên, “Les Catholics,” 268.

20 Goscha, *Historical Dictionary*, 92.

21 Goscha, *Vietnam*, 430.

22 Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam: A New History* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 52.

23 Taylor, *History of the Vietnamese*, 2.

24 John K. Whitmore, “Foreign Influence and the Vietnamese Cultural Core,” in *Southeast Asian Essential Readings*, 2nd edition, ed. D. R. SarDesai (Boulder: Westview Press, 2013), 23–46.

25 Taylor, *History of the Vietnamese*, 3.

26 Southern Vietnam’s more fertile Mekong Delta region supports three rice harvests a year and, generally speaking, does not require the separate cultivation and transplantation of seedlings as is the case in the North.

27 These terms refer to the academic debate between James C. Scott and Samuel L. Popkin. Scott, in his 1976 book, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia*, argued that Southeast Asian peasants had a “subsistence ethic” that led them to value strategies of risk avoidance over profit maximization. Popkin, in his book, *The Rational Peasant: The Political Economy of the Peasant in Rural Vietnam*, challenged the moral economy view as too simplistic. He argued that peasants ultimately do act in a self-interested manner, are interested in taking risks to maximize profits, and do sometimes benefit from exposure to capitalist institutions associated with the modern state.

28 White, “Agrarian,” 84.

29 Táo Hoài, “Việc chấn hưng nông nghiệp ở xứ ta” [Improving Our Country’s Agriculture], *Thanh nghị: Special Issue on a Few Problems of Indochina*, no. 101, February 5, 1945, 18.

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32 “Đường cách mệnh” [The Revolutionary Path], *VKĐTT*, vol. 1 (1924–1930), 20.

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38 *Ibid.*, 94.

39 Oshiro, “Mechanization of Rice Production,” 323–331.

40 William Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh: A Life* (New York: Hyperion, 2000), 344.

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Chapter 1: The Vietnamese Revolution, August 1945 to March 1946

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Chapter 8: Propagandizing the Land Reform

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Chapter 9: Hunger

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 8 *Ibid.*, 270.
 9 All of the following material on famine comes from TTLT₃, PPTT, File number 2855.
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Chapter 10: Điện Biên Phủ and Geneva

- 1 To my knowledge, no scholar has gained access yet to reliable figures about the total amount of rice supplied to the DRV by the PRC during the war.
 2 Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam or Indochina*, 141–143. Goscha cites a French Intelligence report on the DRV economy in Cambodia during 1952. The report estimated that the DRV had extracted “a minimum” of 40 million piasters from taxes on various Cambodian products. As for Laos, Goscha speculates (as others have) that the DRV push into Laos during early 1953 was partly aimed at seizing some of the country’s lucrative opium crop.
 3 As quoted in Gras, *Histoire de la guerre*, 503.
 4 Kevin Ruane, “Anthony Eden,” 158.
 5 Nhân dân, “Nhận định về cuộc đình chiến Triều tiên và ảnh hưởng đối với cuộc kháng chiến Việt-Miền-Lào” [Assessing the Korean Ceasefire and its Influence on the Vietnamese-Cambodian-Laos Resistance War], *Nhân dân*, no. 130, August 16, 1953.
 6 Goscha, *Historical Dictionary*, 307.
 7 Gras, *Histoire de la guerre*, 266. General Revers had come to the conclusion in his 1949 report on the war that, in light of both past French failures to track down and destroy the DRV forces and the impending CCP victory in China, it was no longer realistic to think of ending the war with a complete victory on the battlefield. The French would have to fight for negotiations.

8 Ibid., 511–514.

9 Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place*, 33.

10 Ibid., 443. Fall describes the Tai ethnic minority group as having been a source of soldiers for both the French Union and the DRV. The Meo (Hmong) ethnic group, according to him, was firmly on the side of the French Union.

11 Roy, *Battle of Dien Bien Phu*. Roy argues that this vagueness on the issue of Laos was not accidental, but stemmed from the reluctance of French military and political leaders in Paris to put in writing that they did not want Navarre to feel compelled to defend the Kingdom of Laos.

12 “Điện Biên Phủ” refers to the region where the famous valley lies. The village in the middle of the valley where the French built their garrison is named Mường Thanh.

13 Gras, *Histoire de la guerre*, 516. The capital of the “Tai Federation” had been in the small outpost of Lai Châu, about fifty kilometers north of Điện Biên Phủ, to which the inhabitants were evacuated after the French Union forces first landed in the valley.

14 Ibid., 521.

15 Ibid., 520.

16 Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place*, 31–33; Gras, *Histoire de la guerre*, 522.

17 Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place*, 87–90.

18 Võ Nguyên Giáp, “Phương án tác chiến mùa xuân năm 1954” [Combat Plan for Spring 1954], *Một số văn kiện chỉ đạo chiến cuộc Đông-Xuân 1953–1954 và chiến dịch Điện Biên Phủ* [Military Command Documents from the Winter-Spring Campaign of 1953–1954 and the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign] (Hà Nội: Quân đội Nhân dân, 2004), 207.

19 The historian Qiang Zhai, basing his brief account of the DRV decision to attack the French and State of Vietnam forces at Điện Biên Phủ on an account produced in 1989 by a PRC military academic, Han Huaizhi, suggests that the idea for the attack on the French garrison may have originated from Wei Guoqing, the Chinese military adviser to the DRV. While Zhai’s stress on the enormous influence of the PRC advisory mission to the DRV provides an important corrective to past accounts that went too far in other direction (i.e. stressing DRV autonomy), I think that the decision to challenge the French Union-Vietnamese forces at Điện Biên Phủ was such an obvious one that it cannot reasonably be attributed to the inspiration of one person or group. See Qiang Zhai, “China and the Geneva Conference,” 103–122.

20 Võ Nguyên Giáp, “Combat Plan,” 210.

21 Chen Jian, “China and the First Indochina War,” *The China Quarterly*, no. 133, March 1993, 101–102.

22 Gras, *Histoire de la guerre*, 529.

23 Qiang Zhai, “China and the Geneva Conference,” 107.

24 At that time, Austria was still occupied by American, French, British, and Soviet troops. Austrian neutrality (i.e., the withdrawal of all foreign troops) was finally achieved in 1955 through the Austrian Independence Treaty of May 1955.

25 See, for example, Kliment Voroshilov’s November 6, 1953 “Speech on the 36th Anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution,” printed in the November 7, 1953 issue of *The New York Times*. “The great Chinese people cannot be ignored when the most important

international problems, particularly, affecting the Far East, are being solved. Without the active participation of the Chinese People's Republic one cannot talk seriously about the possibility of easing the international tension and about the solution of Asian problems."

26 "Hồ Chủ tịch trả lời một nhà báo Thụy Điển" [Chairman Hồ Responds to a Swedish Journalist], *Nhân dân*, no. 152, December 6, 1953.

27 Philippe Devillers and Jean Lacouture, *The End of a War: Indochina, 1954* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1969), 49. Bảo Đại ended up firing his premier, Nguyễn Văn Tâm, and replacing him with one of his (Bảo Đại's) cousins, Prince Nguyễn Phúc Bửu Lộc.

28 Hồ Chí Minh, "Reply to Swedish Journalist," *Nhân dân*, December 6, 1953.

29 Asselin, *Hanoi's Road*, 13.

30 *Ibid.*, 26–27.

31 The five articles appear in the February 1, February 11, February 21, February 26, and March 6 issues of *Nhân dân*.

32 "Kết quả Hội nghị Béc-lanh [The Results of the Berlin Conference], *Nhân dân*, no. 167, February 21, 1954.

33 Võ Nguyên Giáp, *Military Command Documents*, 417–418.

34 Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place*, 37. See also pages 88–89, where Fall notes that properly fortifying the camp would have required 36,000 tons of material—the equivalent of 12,000 C-47 flights (about five month's worth of round-the-clock flights).

35 For a detailed discussion of the problem of estimating casualties on both sides of the battle, see Jean-Jaques Arzalier, "Dien Bien Phu: Le Pertes Militaire," in *La Bataille de Dien Bien Phu, entre histoire et memoire: 1954–2004* (Paris: Publications de la Societe Francaise d'Histoire d'Outre-Mer, 2004), 147–168.

36 Nguyễn Chí Thanh, *Military Command Documents*, 550–551.

37 *Ibid.*

38 Devillers and Lacouture, *End of a War*, 171.

39 Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place*, 427.

40 "Draft Memorandum, 'A Comprehensive Solution for Restoring Peace in Indochina,' Prepared by the Vietnam Group of the Chinese Delegation Attending the Geneva Conference" May 04, 1954, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, CFMA, Record No. 206-00055-04 (1); original Record No. 206-C0008. Obtained by CWIHP and translated for CWIHP by Chen Zhihong. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/110592>

41 Devillers and Lacouture, *End of a War*, 275–300.

42 John W. Holmes, "Review of Robert F. Randle's *Geneva 1954: The Settlement of the Indochinese War*," *The International Journal* 25, no. 4, autumn 1970, 786–788.

43 Jian and Zhihua, "The Geneva Conference of 1954," 8.

44 Mari Olsen, *Soviet-Vietnam Relations and the Role of China, 1949–1964: Changing Alliances* (New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2006), 46.

45 Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers, Vol 3*, 500–501.

46 *The Truth about Vietnam-China Relations over the Last Thirty Years* (Hà Nội: The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 1979).

47 Goscha, Vietnam, 417–418; Pierre Asselin, *Vietnam's American War: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 76.

48 Upon being elected prime minister of France on June 18, 1954, five weeks after the beginning of the Indochina discussions at the Geneva Conference, Pierre Mendes-France declared that he would resign his office in one month (July 20) if an agreement had not been reached at Geneva. Mendes-France had long been an advocate of direct French negotiations with the DRV and was therefore seen by the Communist camp as more sympathetic to their side than had been his predecessor, Joseph Laniel. The USSR-PRC-DRV side apparently deemed it desirable to seek an agreement with Mendes-France in power, meaning that his July 20 deadline was tacitly understood by both sides to be the actual deadline for the negotiations.

49 Trường Chinh, “Để hoàn thành nhiệm vụ và đẩy mạnh công tác trước mắt [To Complete our Task and Push Forward with Present Work], *VKDTT*, vol. 15 (1954), 174.

50 Goscha, “The Revolutionary Laos,” 68.

51 Một trang lịch sử tóm tắt (1945-1954) [A Page of History Summarized], *Nhân dân*, no. 205, July 16-18, 1954.

Chapter 11: The Period of the 300-Days, 1954–1955

1 The Associated State of Vietnam and its successor, the Republic of Vietnam, along with the United States, had not signed the Geneva Accords, did not officially recognize the DRV, and certainly hoped for the Communist state's demise. Nevertheless, the reality of the DRV, particularly after the victory at Điện Biên Phủ and the Geneva Accords, was undeniable.

2 Herring, *America's Longest War*, 55.

3 Moise, *Land Reform in China and North Vietnam*, 192–193.

4 Peter Hansen, “Bắc di cư,” 178–179.

5 I have borrowed Ralph Smith's term for the DRV approach to the Geneva Accords (see Smith, *An International History*, 20).

6 Kahin, *Intervention*, 62. See also Bradley, *Vietnam at War*, 68. Bradley writes that the DRV leaders “were confident, when the promised reunification elections came in 1956, that the DRV would win.”

7 Asselin, *Hanoi's Road*, 12–13; Olsen, *Soviet-Vietnam Relations*, 66–67.

8 Bator, *Vietnam*, 129–130; Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An*, 34. Race writes, “According to An [a high-ranking VWP defector], higher level cadres (province and above) were certain that general elections would never take place, although this was not discussed at lower levels to maintain morale and so as not to conflict with the Party's public stance that the Geneva Accords were a great victory for the Party.”

9 Smith, *An International History*, 20.

10 Ibid., 30.

11 Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam*, 70.

12 Robert F. Randle, *Geneva 1954: The Settlement of the Indochinese War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 433.

13 With respect to Pakistan, Nguyễn Tất Thành was probably referring to American infringements on British business interests there. As for Australia and New Zealand, Thành may have been referring to the ANZUS Treaty signed by Australia, New Zealand, and the United States on September 1, 1951, for the collective defense of their interests in the Pacific. Such a treaty had the effect of increasing American influence in Australia and New Zealand at the expense of Great Britain.

14 Hồ Chí Minh, “Báo cáo tại Hội nghị lần thứ 6 của Ban Chấp hành Trung ương Đảng (khóa II) [Report Delivered at the 6th Plenum of the Party Central Executive Committee], *VKDTT*, vol. 15 (1954), 163.

15 Ibid., 168.

16 The Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) was established at the Manila Conference held from September 6–8, 1954. The treaty was signed by the Australia, France, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, Great Britain, and the United States. The treaty stated: “Each party recognizes that aggression by means of an armed attack in the treaty area against any of the Parties or against any State or territory which the Parties by unanimous agreement hereafter designate, would endanger its own peace and safety, and agrees that it will in that event act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional processes.” See Randle, *Geneva 1954*, 363–372.

17 Hồ Chí Minh, “6th Plenum Report,” 163.

18 Jean Sainteny’s account of his treatment and that of other French in Hanoi who were attached to his mission suggests that the courtship was extremely brief and never actually wholehearted on the DRV side. Once the DRV leaders learned that France was not going to grant them diplomatic recognition and that Sainteny was not going to become an official ambassador, they steadily lost interest in him. It also appears from Sainteny’s description of how the regime handled the issue of economic cooperation with France that there was no real intent among the VWP leaders to have France be involved in the DRV’s economic life or, indeed, in any aspect of life in the DRV. In this respect, I question Devillers and Lacouture’s depiction of the Sainteny mission as a tragic missed opportunity for France. See the chapter, “The Sainteny Mission,” in their *End of a War: Indochina 1954*.

19 John Prados, “The Numbers Game,” *The VVA Veteran*, January/February 2005, accessed June 2017, http://archive.vva.org/archive/TheVeteran/2005_01/feature_numbersGame.htm.

20 “Thông cáo của Ủy ban Quốc tế về vấn đề đảm bảo quyền tự do dân chủ” [ICC Communique about the Guarantee of Democratic Freedoms], *Nhân dân*, no. 223, September 9, 1954.

21 Prados, “The Numbers Game.”

22 “Chỉ thị của Ban Bí thư: Về việc đấu tranh chống Pháp và bọn Ngô Đình Diệm dụ

đồ bắt ép một số đồng bào ta vào Nam” [Directive of the Secretariat, 5/9/1954: On the Struggle against the French and Ngô Đình Diệm efforts to entice and force a number of compatriots to head to the South], *VKDĐT*, vol. 15 (1954), 263.

23 Hansen, “Bắc di cư,” 188–189. According to Hansen, a combination of factors contributed to the decision of Northerner Catholics to leave: the collective memory of the Catholic persecution by non-Catholics in the 19th century, fear of the Vietnamese Communists, fear of famine, curiosity and hope with respect to prospects in the South, and the advice of village priests.

24 Directive of the Secretariat (5/9/1954), 265.

25 *Ibid.*, 267.

26 *Ibid.*, 268.

27 *Ibid.*, 269.

28 *Ibid.*, 275.

29 *Ibid.*, 276.

30 *Ibid.*, 277.

31 “Nghị quyết của Bộ Chính trị: Về tình hình mới, nhiệm vụ mới, và chính sách mới của Đảng” [Politburo Resolution: On the Party’s New Situation, New Tasks, and New Policies], *VKDĐT*, vol. 15 (1954), 289.

32 T/L Ban Bí thư, Chánh Văn phòng [On Behalf of the Secretariat, Cabinet Chief], “Chỉ thị của Ban Bí thư, 30/9/1954: Về vấn đề thu thuế nông nghiệp vùng tạm bị chiếm mới được giải phóng” [Secretariat Directive on Collecting the Agricultural Tax in Temporarily Occupied Areas that were Recently Liberated], *VKDĐT*, vol. 15 (1954), 325.

33 It is worth noting here that this approach of keeping the land reform away from areas where the possibility of emigration was greatest raises questions about whether the VWP leaders actually thought that the campaign was “popular” among rural communities. DRV propaganda on the land reform always depicted the campaign as being enthusiastically received by rural communities. If such were the case, though, why not carry out the campaign first and foremost in areas where emigration was the greatest possibility?

34 “Thành tích bốn đợt phát động quần chúng giảm tô” [Results for Four Waves of Mass Mobilization through Rent Reduction], *Nhân dân*, no. 214, August 13–15, 1954.

35 “Đợt 1 cải cách ruộng đất ở liên khu Việt Bắc đã hoàn thành” [Wave 1 of the Land Reform in the Vietnamese North Interzone Has Concluded], *Nhân dân*, no. 223, September 9–10, 1954.

36 “Nghị quyết của bộ chính trị về tình hình mới, nhiệm vụ mới, và chính sách mới của Đảng [Politburo Resolution on the New Situation, the New Task, and the New Policies of the Party], *VKDĐT*, vol. 15 (1954), 298.

37 *Ibid.*

38 *Ibid.*, 298–299.

39 Trường Chinh, “Chỉ thị của Bộ Chính trị, 3/11/1954: Về mấy vấn đề cần chú ý trong khi xử trí bọn địa chủ có tội ác trong phát động quần chúng giảm tô và cải cách ruộng đất” [Politburo Directive, 3/11/1954: A Few Issues that Demand Attention When

Dealing with Criminal Landlords during the Mass Mobilization through Rent Reduction and Land Reform], *VKDTT*, vol. 15 (1954), 356.

40 Ibid.

41 Trường Chinh, “Chỉ thị của ban bí thư 26/9/1954: Về nhiệm vụ của các cấp Đảng ở các địa phương thuộc bắc vĩ tuyến 17 đối với Ủy ban quốc tế.” [Directive from the General Secretary’s Office, 26/9/1954: On the Responsibilities of Local Party Levels Based North of the 17th Parallel with Respect to the International Control Commission] *VKDTT*, vol. 15 (1954), 318–324.

42 Trường Chinh, “Chỉ thị của Ban Bí thư, 6/11/1954: Về việc đối phó với âm mưu của địch lừa phỉnh và áp bức đồng bào Công giáo di cư vào Nam” [Secretariat Directive, 6/11/1954: Dealing with the Enemy’s Scheme to Trick and Force Catholic Compatriots to Emigrate to the South], *VKDTT*, vol. 15 (1954), 362.

43 Ibid., 363.

44 Ibid., 364.

45 Ibid., 365.

46 Ibid., 367.

47 Trường Chinh, “Chỉ thị của Ban Bí thư: 23/11/1954: Về việc tổ chức mít tinh tại Nhà Hát Lớn Hà Nội nhân dịp kỷ niệm “Nam Bộ khởi nghĩa 1940” [Secretariat Directive: Organizing a Meeting in the Hà Nội Opera House for the Anniversary of the 1940 Southern Uprising], November 23, 1954, *VKDTT*, vol. 15 (1954), 375.

48 Trường Chinh, “Chỉ thị của Bộ Chính trị 26/11/1954: Về việc gây một phong trào rộng lớn và mạnh mẽ của các tầng lớp nhân dân toàn quốc chống các hành động trắng trợn của đối phương vi phạm Hiệp định Geneva [Politburo Directive: On Creating a Large and Powerful Movement Comprising all Classes of the Entire Country for the Purpose of Resisting the Enemy’s Blatant Violations of the Geneva Accords], November 26, 1954, *VKDTT*, vol. 15 (1954), 385.

49 Lê Văn Lương, “Chỉ thị của bộ chính trị số 07-CT/TW: Đẩy mạnh đấu tranh phá âm mưu mới của địch trong việc dụ dỗ và cưỡng ép giáo dân di cư vào Nam” [Politburo Directive no. 7: Step up the Struggle to Destroy the Enemy’s New Scheme to Entice and Force Catholics to Emigrate South], February 16, 1955, *VKDTT*, vol. 16 (1955), 74.

50 “Trung ương gửi các liên khu ủy” [Communique from the Central Committee to Interzone Branches], March 20, 1955, *VKDTT*, vol. 16 (1955), 232.

Chapter 12: Reinvigorating the Land Reform, 1955–1956

1 Moise, *Land Reform in China and North Vietnam*, 186–189.

2 Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam*, 65–67.

3 Ibid., 63.

4 Lê Văn Lương, “Chỉ thị của Trung ương số 05-CT/TW 3/2/1955 Về việc chỉnh đốn cơ quan chỉ đạo cấp huyện trong cải cách ruộng đất” [Central Committee Order No. 5 on Reorganizing District-Level Leading Offices during the Land Reform], *VKDTT*, vol. 16 (1955), 39–47.

5 “Kết luận cuộc thảo luận ở Hội nghị Trung ương lần thứ bảy (3–12/3/1955) [Conclusions from Discussions during the Central Committee’s Seventh Plenum], *VKDĐT*, vol. 16 (1955), 175–204.

6 Lê Văn Lương, “Nghị quyết của Ban Bí thư số 17, 3/6/1955: Về công tác Tổ chức năm 1955” [Secretariat Resolution no. 17: Organizational Work During 1955], June 3, 1955, *VKDĐT*, vol. 16 (1955), 326.

7 *Ibid.*, 324.

8 *Ibid.*, 332–333.

9 Trường Chinh, “Báo cáo của đồng chí Trường Chinh tại Hội nghị Trung ương lần thứ tám (13–20/8/1955): Đoàn kết nhân dân toàn quốc đấu tranh để thực hiện thống nhất Việt Nam trên cơ sở độc lập và dân chủ” [Trường Chinh’s Report at the 8th Plenum of the Central Committee (13–20/8/1955): Unify People throughout the Country to Struggle for the Implementation of Vietnamese Unification on the Basis of Independence and Democracy], *VKDĐT*, vol. 16 (1955), 511–512.

10 William Hinton’s 1966 book *Fanshen: A Documentary of Revolution in Chinese Village* examines a village going through the Reinspection phase of the land reform.

11 Nguyễn Duy Trinh, “Chỉ thị của Ban Bí thư, số 06/CT-TW: Về việc tăng cường lãnh đạo công tác chỉnh đốn và xây dựng chi bộ nông thôn trong đợt 5 cải cách ruộng đất” [Secretariat Directive no. 6: Strengthening Leadership in the Work of Reorganizing and Constructing Rural Party Branches during Wave 5 of the Land Reform], January 21, 1956, *VKDĐT*, vol. 17 (1956), 33–34.

12 *Ibid.*, 28.

13 Lê Đăng Tiến, “Mài sắc hơn nữa tinh thần cảnh giác với giai cấp địa chủ: Kiên quyết chống tư tưởng hữu khuynh, sợ địch” [Sharpen Even More the Spirit of Vigilance with the Landlord Class: Resolutely Struggle against Rightist Thinking and Fear of the Enemy], *Nhân dân*, no. 465, June 11, 1955.

14 V.H., “Nâng cao cảnh giác, đập tan âm mưu phá hoại của giai cấp địa chủ” [Raise Vigilance and Destroy the Landlord Class’s Scheme of Sabotage] and Trần Các, “Kiểm thảo tư tưởng hữu khuynh” [Carry out Self-Criticism for Rightist Thinking], *Nhân dân*, no. 468, June 14, 1955.

15 Nguyễn Văn Bổng, “Sửa chữa được tư tưởng hữu khuynh của cán bộ xóm Lâm-thành cải cách ruộng đất thành công” [After Fixing the Rightist Thinking of Cadres, Land Reform in Lâm-Thành Hamlet was Successful], *Nhân dân*, no. 513, July 29, 1955.

16 Nguyễn Kính, “Sau khi chỉnh huấn bước 2, cán bộ bắt đầu sửa chữa được tư tưởng hữu khuynh, công tác đã tiến bộ” [After Undergoing Rectification for Step 2, Cadres have Begun to Fix Their Rightist Thinking, Work Has Improved], *Nhân dân*, no. 521, August 6, 1955.

17 Lê Thạch Sơn, “Nhận rõ âm mưu của địa chủ, kịp thời trấn áp những hành động phá hoại của chúng [Recognize Clearly the Landlords’ Schemes and Promptly Repress their Acts of Sabotage], *Nhân dân*, no. 563, September 20, 1955.

18 Tin của Ủy ban Cải cách ruộng đất trung ương: Đội phát động giảm tô xã Chiến-thắng (Lạng Sơn) đi sâu truy ra địa chủ cường hào gian ác đầu sỏ, phát hiện tổ chức biệt kích và giải quyết mâu thuẫn dân tộc” [News from the Central Land Reform

Committee: The Rent Reduction Team of Chiến Thắng Commune (Lạng Sơn) Probed Deeply and Found a Cruel Despotic Landlord Ringleader, and Discovered a Commando Organization], *Nhân dân*, no. 580, October 4, 1955.

19 Nguyễn Thái, “Công tác chống địch phá hoại cải cách ruộng đất ở Bắc Ninh—Bắc Giang” [Working against Enemy Sabotage of the Land Reform in Bắc Ninh—Bắc Giang], *Nhân dân*, no. 632, November 25, 1955.

20 Hồ Viết Thắng, “Hoàn thành cải cách ruộng đất để mau chóng khôi phục và phát triển kinh tế” [Complete the Land Reform in Order to Quickly Restore the Economy], *Học tập* [Study], no. 1, December 1955, 48.

21 Quyết tiến, “Nâng cao cảnh giác cách mạng” [Raise Revolutionary Vigilance], *Học tập*, no. 1, December 1955, 51.

22 “Đợt 5 cải cách ruộng đất đang mở rộng khắp đồng bằng miền Bắc” [Wave 5 of the Land Reform Is Spreading out over the Entirety of the Northern Delta], *Học tập*, no. 3, February, 1956, 73.

23 “Phải kiên quyết và kịp thời đánh địch để đẩy mạnh đợt 5 cải cách ruộng đất” [The Enemy Must Be Resolutely and Promptly Attacked in Order to Push Forward Wave 5 of the Land Reform], *Học tập*, no. 4, March 1956, 57.

24 “Đợt 5 cải cách ruộng đất đang mở rộng khắp đồng bằng miền Bắc” [Wave 5 of the Land Reform Is Expanding throughout the Northern Delta], *Học tập*, no. 2, January 1, 1956, 73.

25 TTLT3, UBCCRD Liên khu Việt Bắc, file 1157.

26 Đồng chí Trường Chinh và đồng chí Lê Đức Thọ đi dự Đại hội lần thứ 20 của Đảng Cộng sản Liên Xô” [Comrade Trường Chinh and Comrade Lê Đức Thọ Attend the CPSU 20th Congress], *Nhân dân*, no. 704, February 5, 1956.

27 Taubman, *Khrushchev*, 274.

28 Nikita Khrushchev, “Secret Speech,” trans. Jonathan Bone, 11, accessed March 2013: <http://novaonline.nvcc.edu/eli/evans/his242/Documents/Speech.pdf>.

29 Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: Stalin’s Purge of the 1930s* (New York: MacMillan, 1968).

30 Khrushchev, “Secret Speech.”

31 Karl E. Loewenstein, “Re-Emergence of Public Opinion in the Soviet Union: Khrushchev and Responses to the Secret Speech,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 58, no. 8, 1956 and Its Legacy (December 2006), 1329–1345.

32 File 716, Central Land Reform Committee. This file was provided to me by a person in Hà Nội.

33 File 716, Central Land Reform Committee.

34 Nguyễn Duy Trinh, “Chỉ thị của Ban Bí thư, số 27/CT-TW, 21/5/1956: Về việc sửa chữa một số sai lầm và hoàn thành tốt công tác chỉnh đốn chi bộ trong cải cách ruộng đất đợt 5” [Secretariat Directive no. 27, 21/5/1956: Fixing a Number of Mistakes and Completing Well the Work of Party Branch Reorganization during the Land Reform], *VKDTT*, vol. 17 (1956), 199.

35 This is according to a description of that 9th Meeting of the Central Land Reform Committee contained in a later report by that committee.

Chapter 13: Fallout, 1956

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Chapter 14: Re-Stalinization and Collectivization, 1957–1960

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Conclusion

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