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Socialist Transformation in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam

By

Alec Gordon Holcombe

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

History

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Peter Zinoman, Chair
Professor Yuri Slezkine
Professor Penelope Edwards

Spring 2014

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Abstract

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Alec Gordon Holcombe

Doctor of Philosophy in History

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Peter Zinoman, Chair

In this dissertation, I examine the controversial land reform campaign carried out by the Vietnamese Workers' Party (VWP) in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) from 1953 to 1956. The VWP leadership based the campaign on Maoist models and, indeed, planned and executed it with the help of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) advisers. As with land reform in China, the VWP's version involved sending thousands of hastily trained cadres into rural communities to teach villagers about class struggle, to organize public trials of alleged class enemies (followed in many cases by public executions), and to oversee the redistribution of land and personal belongings confiscated from those targeted by the campaign.

A few weeks after the completion of the land reform in the summer of 1956, the VWP leaders apologized publicly to the North Vietnamese people, stating that "errors" had been committed during the campaign's implementation. The public apology included a promise that these "errors," where possible, would be "corrected" in a new campaign. The key idea of this official explanation was that the negative phenomena of the campaign (primarily its extraordinary violence) had been an unfortunate accident, and not what the Party leaders had intended to happen when they formulated the land reform policy. Something had gone awry during the campaign's implementation, with cadres committing "leftist deviations," which were not "discovered" by the Party leaders until it was too late.

Using a range of different sources that have become available to scholars in the last two decades, I test the validity of this official VWP explanation for what had happened during the land reform. I also test the validity of the VWP leadership's original justification for carrying out the campaign, which was the notion that peasant misery in the countryside in early 1953 stemmed primarily from "feudal exploitation." I argue that both narratives do not stand up to close scrutiny and that the land reform unfolded largely as planned by the Party leaders.

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Introduction

In this dissertation I examine the controversial land reform campaign carried out by the Vietnamese Workers' Party (VWP) in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) from 1953 to 1956. The VWP leadership based the campaign on Maoist models and, indeed, planned and executed it with the help of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) advisers.[1] As with land reform in China,[2] the VWP's version involved sending thousands of hastily trained cadres into rural communities to teach villagers about class struggle, to organize public trials of alleged class enemies (followed in many cases by public executions), and to oversee the redistribution of land and personal belongings confiscated from those targeted by the campaign. On August 18, 1956, a few weeks after the completion of the land reform, Hồ Chí Minh printed an article about the campaign on the front page of the Party's main newspaper, *The People* [Nhân dân]. The DRV leader described the land reform as a "great victory," thanks in part to the "correct policy of the Party and Government." However, the "great victory" had been marred to some extent, he reported, by "errors" [sai lầm] allegedly committed during the campaign's implementation:

> Land reform is an anti-feudal class struggle; it's a revolution that 'loosens the heavens and splits the earth;' it is fierce and tense. Moreover, because the enemy carried out frenzied acts of sabotage; because a number of our [land reform] cadres did not yet grasp the policy, did not yet actually follow the mass line correctly; because the leadership of the Central Committee and the Government lacked clarity in some aspects, and lacked inspection and guidance, there occurred some shortcomings and errors during the land reform. These occurred in implementing rural unity, in attacking the enemy, in the [Party] reorganization, in the agricultural tax policy, etc.

Hồ Chí Minh then assured the Vietnamese people that the Party Central Committee and the government had carried out a "severe" [nghiêm khắc] examination of these "errors" and had come up with a plan to "resolutely correct them."[3]

That plan involved changing the class status of people who had been incorrectly labeled as "landlords" or "rich peasants," restoring Party membership to those who had been wrongly purged during the campaign, treating those labeled as "landlords" in accordance with the official

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[1] King C. Chen, *Vietnam and China, 1938-1954* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 258-259, and Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 39.

[2] Notable accounts of the land reform practiced by Chinese Communists include: C.K. Yang, *A Chinese Village in Early Communist Transition* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1959); Isabel and David Crook, *Revolution in a Chinese Village, Ten Mile Inn* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul LTD, 1959) and *Ten Mile Inn: Mass Movement in a Chinese Village* (New York: Pantheon, 1979); William Hinton, *Fanshen: A Documentary of Revolution in a Chinese Village* (1966; repr., Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Mark Selden, *The Yenan Way in Revolutionary China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971); Recounted by Yue Daiyun (written by Caroline Wakeman, *To the Storm: The Odyssey of a Revolutionary Chinese Woman* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Edward Friedman, Paul G. Pickowicz, Mark Seldon, and Kay Ann Johnson, *Chinese Village, Socialist State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991); Odoric Y.K. Wou, *Mobilizing the Masses: Building Revolution in Henan* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1994).

[3] Hồ Chí Minh, "Thư của Hồ Chủ tịch gửi đồng bào nông thôn và cán bộ nhân dịp cải cách ruộng đất ở miền Bắc căn bản thành công" [Letter from Chairman Hồ to Rural Compatriots and [Land Reform] Cadres on the Occasion of the Land Reform's Basic Success in the North], *Nhân dân* [The People], no. 897, August 18, 1956.

regulations, and reducing the estimated agricultural yields (on which taxes were based) in cases where they had been set too high.

In an important internal report to members of the Central Committee, though, the Party leaders were more candid, acknowledging, for example, that the practice of torture [truy bức nhục hình] had been "common" in the campaign:[4]

> There were even places where the best local Party branches were the ones that were the most heavily repressed, where the best Party members were the ones who were the most severely punished. Many Party branches that had made big contributions to the resistance war were considered to be reactionary and dissolved, with their secretaries and executive members being either imprisoned or shot.[5]

But the actual extent of this violence inflicted on the tens of thousands of people in local Party branches and, of course, on those in the community labeled as "landlords,"in terms of overall losses in human life, was never mentioned. Even today, sixty years after the fact, the Party leaders in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) continue a policy of preventing access to the type of internal documents that would help scholars estimate the land reform's death toll. In archival materials about the campaign that I was able to view in Hà Nội, documents that provided broad figures for executions would always have the figures carefully blotted out. This was the case for materials provided to Vietnamese historians as well. And no Vietnamese historian or intellectual in the SRV with whom I spoke about the campaign, including the authors of five important historical fiction accounts of the campaign, dared provide me with an estimate of how many people had died.[6]

The land reform continues to be a sensitive issue in Vietnam for a number of reasons. First, the VWP leaders carried out the majority of the campaign during a period that was, according to their public statements, supposed to be one of peace—that is, immediately following the July, 1954 Geneva Accords that brought the First Indochina War to a close. The (theoretically) peaceful circumstances of the land reform meant that its violence appears to have been entirely self-generated by the regime. Why, after eight years of costly war culminating in the remarkable victory over the French Union forces at Điện Biên Phủ, and why, if the Party leaders had actually expected national elections to occur in the summer of 1956 as proposed by the Geneva Accords, was it necessary for an additional twenty or thirty thousand people, possibly more, to perish in North Vietnam?

Second, the campaign was qualitatively different from the First or Second Indochina Wars. Despite the fact that all people in Vietnam felt the impact of those conflicts, only a modest percentage of the population actually saw combat. With the land reform, virtually the entire population of the North (roughly ten million people) experienced the campaign first-hand. All generations, from the youngest to the oldest, attended the public trials of those targeted by the campaign.[7] Non-participation was not an option. Even fishing communities along rivers and also

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[4] "Đề cương báo cáo của Bộ Chính trị tại Hội nghị Trung ương lần thứ 10: 25/8/1956-5/10/1956" [Draft Politburo Report for the Central Committee's 10th Plenum], *VKDTT 1956* [Hà Nội: Chính trị Quốc gia, 2002], 427.

[5] Ibid.

[6] These authors were Ngô Ngọc Bội, Tô Hoài, Đào Thắng, Tạ Duy Anh, and Nguyễn Khoa Đăng.

[7] A handful of photographs of public trials during the land reform may now be found easily on the internet. The idea of the entire village community, young and old, being made to attend the public trials, also appears in the historical fiction accounts of the campaign and coheres with the memories of older Vietnamese today.

along the North Vietnamese coast went through an adjusted version of land reform.[8] As such, the campaign, as an overwhelmingly negative episode imposed on the North Vietnamese people by the DRV state, had the potential to serve as a catalyst for rallying popular opposition to the regime.

Third, the land reform continues to be a sensitive topic because it involves the historically charged relationship between Vietnam and China.[9] The campaign raises questions about the nature of the independence won from the French in 1954. Could the heavy CCP influence on the land reform be interpreted as a sign that the DRV had evicted the French only to fall back under the thumb of China? How much influence did the CCP have on DRV domestic policy?

Fourth, the campaign raises questions about an important part of the regime's narrative of the Second Indochina War. The DRV leaders preached that the anti-communist Diệm regime, which ruled over the Republic of Vietnam (RVN or South Vietnam), was illegitimate because it needed to use repression to maintain its power. Yet if the land reform were interpreted as a form of mass repression, it would suggest a fundamental similarity in the leadership styles of the two regimes.

And fifth, the land reform continues to be a sensitive topic in Vietnam because of the regime's carefully maintained cult of personality around the mythic character "Hồ Chí Minh," the public persona of the brilliant leader and father of Vietnamese Communism, Nguyễn Tất Thành. The land reform, with its violence, injustices, and length, simply does not cohere with the image of Hồ Chí Minh as the saintly loving father of the Vietnamese people. A careful investigation of Thành's involvement with the campaign could only harm the image of Hồ Chí Minh. The official Vietnamese Communist view, promoted originally by Thành himself, suggests that "Uncle Hồ" was somehow unaware of what had been happening during the land reform. If this explanation were true, an investigation of his actions during the campaign would show how he was 'asleep at the wheel' while all the "errors" were occurring. Or, an investigation might show that Thành actually was involved with the campaign and that he had tried to pretend that he had not been, placing the blame on others. (As we will see presently, Western scholars have had their own way of resolving this contradiction between the land reform and the image of Hồ Chí Minh.)

Official DRV Narratives and Explanations of the Land Reform

Shortly after the VWP leadership made the decision in late 1952 to carry out land reform, they began to promote an image of rural life in Vietnam that justified what was to happen during

[8] Lê Thức và Nguyễn Thế Hùng, "Khúc sông, mặt biển đã về ta" [The Section of the River, the Surface of the Sea have been Returned to us], *Nhân dân* [The People], no. 718, February 20, 1956. As the article explained, "The vast ocean is very large resource, but before today, the fishermen were very miserable. The gang of landlords occupied sections of river and areas of the sea. They then oppressed and exploited the people very ruthlessly." Ultimately, the DRV leaders would organize North Vietnam's fishermen into state-controlled cooperatives that would place the fish at the disposal of the state. For an article explaining the organization of fishing communities into "syndicates" [tập đoàn], see "Củng cố và phát triển các tập đoàn đánh cá" [Consolidate and Develop Fishing Syndicates], *Nhân dân* [The People], no. 943, October 4, 1956.

[9] As the source of so much of Vietnam's culture (70 percent of Vietnamese words are derived from Chinese), China is an object of understandable fascination for many Vietnamese. Yet the history of conflict between Viet and Chinese peoples over the centuries also informs Vietnamese feelings toward China. The recent uproar among Vietnamese intellectuals over their government's proposal to sell bauxite mining rights in the Central Highlands to a Chinese firm is one example. (See the recent dissertation on this issue produced by Jason Morris). Another heated issue for many Vietnamese is that of national sovereignty in the South China Sea.

the campaign. First, every community would need to have "landlords," who would be depicted as responsible in one way or another for virtually every hardship endured by the community, both in the past and in the present day.[10] Second, poor peasants would need to be land hungry and therefore grateful to the Party when provided with land confiscated from local landlords. Third, local Party branches would need to be seen as either comprised of actual landlords or under their thumb. This would be put forward over and over again as an explanation for why the Party's policies (particularly the ones related to agricultural production and taxation) had brought about such disappointing results over the seven years since the Party seized power. And fourth, after the campaign had begun, the regime would affirm the correctness of the policy embarked upon by depicting the post-land-reform rural world as suddenly thriving in all aspects political, economic, and cultural.[11]

During the period of the campaign, this image of the countryside would appear repeatedly in the official statements of the Party leaders and also in cultural works produced by DRV intellectuals.[12] As committed Marxist-Leninists, the VWP leaders saw culture as an arm of politics. They expected DRV intellectuals to produce novels, stories, poems, plays, paintings, and music that would serve current policies. Theoretically, these works (after being checked carefully by the Party's cultural officials) would then be disseminated broadly among the

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[10] This public discourse, in my estimation, began with the *The People's* March 1, 1953 article on the first major target of the land reform, the (now famous) woman, Nguyễn Thị Năm. See N.D., "Vụ Cát-Hanh-Long: Phát động nông dân đấu tranh" [The Case of Cát-Hanh-Long: Mobilizing the Peasants to Struggle], *Nhân dân* [The People], no. 97, March 1, 1953.

[11] All these themes can be found in the group of articles about the land reform published by the top Party leaders in *The People* during the first three months of 1953. For the first official internal expression of these themes, see [Nguyễn Tất Thành], "Báo cáo tại Hội nghị lần thứ tư Ban Chấp hành Trung ương Đảng (Khóa II), 25/1/1953, về tình hình trước mặt và nhiệm vụ cải cách ruộng đất." [Report at the Fourth Plenum of the Central Executive Committee (second session) on the Present Situation and the Task of Land Reform], *VKDTT 1953*, 15-29, and Trường Chinh, "Báo cáo của tổng bí thư Trường Chinh tại Hội nghị lần thứ tư Ban Chấp hành Trung ương Đảng (Khóa II) Về mục đích, ý nghĩa, phương châm, phương pháp và kế hoạch thực hiện chính sách cải cách ruộng đất." [Genereral-secretary Trường Chinh's Report at the Fourth Plenum of the Party Central Executive Committee on the Goals, Meaning, Guidelines, Methods, and Plan for Implement the Land Reform Policy], *VKDTT 1953*, 30-83.

[12] Some of the major works of land reform literature include the following: Nguyễn Đình Thi, "Mẹ con đồng chí Chanh" [The Mother and Child of Comrade Chanh] (Việt Nam, Văn nghệ, 8/1953); Xuân Diệu, *Mẹ Con* [Mother and Child] (Văn nghệ, 1954); *Thơ ca phát động* [Mobilization Poetry] (1953, repr., Hà Nội: Văn nghệ, 1955); Kim Lân, *Nên vợ nên chồng* [Becoming Wife and Husband] (Việt Nam, Văn nghệ, 1954); Nguyễn Xuân Xanh and Lê Đạt, *Nhận ruộng* (Việt Nam: Văn nghệ, 1954); Nguyễn Công Hoàn, *Nông dân với địa chủ* (Hà Nội: Tương lai, 4/1955); (various), *Vạch khổ* [Determining Misery] (Việt Nam: Văn nghệ Trung ương, 1954); Ngọc Tự, *Ánh sáng đang về* [The Light is Returning] (Hà Nội: Quân đội nhân dân, 1956); Nguyễn Văn Bổng, *Bếp đỏ lửa* [The Flaming Red Stove] (Hà Nội: Văn nghệ, 1955); Tú Mỡ, *Căm thù địa chủ* [The Hartred of Landlords] (Hà Nội: Văn nghệ, 7/1955); Huyền Kiêu, *Chị Nự thôn Cam* [Ms. Nự of Cam Hamlet], (Hà Nội: Văn nghệ, 12/1955); *Chuyện Chị Khoan* [The Story of Ms. Khoan] (Hà Nội: Thanh niên, 1955); Nguyễn Khắc Dực, *Con bò quả thực* [The Cow Won through Struggle] (Hà Nội: Văn nghệ, 1954); Đào Vũ, "Trong lửa đấu tranh" [In the Flame of Struggle], *Văn nghệ*, no. 47, January 1954 [this is an account of his experience watching land reform in the PRC during 1950]; Nguyễn Khắc Thứ, *Đất chuyển* [The Shifting Earth] (Hà Nội, Văn nghệ, 1955); Nguyễn Huy Tưởng, *Gốc đa* [The Root of the Banyan Tree] (Việt Nam: Văn nghệ, 1954); Trọng Hứa, "Gợi khổ" [Drawing out the Misery], (Việt Nam: Văn nghệ, 1954); Vũ Giang, *Vinh quang này là nhờ có Đảng* [Thanks to the Party I have this Honor], (sec. ed., Hà Nội: Thanh niên, 1955); *Luống cày dậy sóng: Thơ ca phát động CCRD Đợt 5* [Rising Waves of Furrows: Mass Mobilization Poetry for Wave 5 of Land Reform] (Đoàn II C.C.R.Đ. Nghệ An [Land Reform Brigade 2 in Nghệ An], 1956); and, what I consider to be the defining work of land reform fiction, Nguyễn Huy Tưởng, *Truyện Anh Lục* [The Story of Lục] (Hà Nội: Văn nghệ, 1956). This attempt at an epic novel (three volumes) of the land reform became embroiled in controversy after it was awarded a literary prize by the regime's cultural officials, one of whom was Nguyễn Huy Tưởng himself.

regime's cadres and, to a lesser extent, the population at large, providing one and all with a picture of how the current revolutionary process was supposed to unfold.

One of the key characters in this picture of the countryside was, of course, the 'evil landlord.' During the late colonial period (the 1930s and early 1940s), a group of "critical realist" writers wrote about aspects of rural life in Vietnam. In the works of Nam Cao, Ngô Tất Tố, Nguyễn Công Hoan, Nguyên Hồng, Vũ Trọng Phụng, and others, can be found colorful and realistic depictions of rapacious local elites.[13] These "critical realist" landlords were probably a source of inspiration for DRV writers as they attempted to depict the antagonists of the land reform. But it appears that the landlords from the 1930s and 1940s, bad as they were (here I am thinking especially of Vũ Trọng Phụng's Nghị Hách[14] and Ngô Tất Tố's Nghị Quế[15]) did not seem evil enough to the Party leaders to justify the repressive measures being used against the "landlord class" (public trial, loss of property, imprisonment, and in many cases, execution). As such, DRV intellectuals writing about the campaign created landlords that were crude caricatures of the landlord in village life. The critical realist landlords Nghị Hách and Nghị Quế remain popular literary characters in Vietnam today. As for the land reform literature, it left behind not a single character.

To some extent, DRV works of 'land reform literature' were probably also influenced by Chinese Communist examples. In late 1952, shortly after the decision had been made to carry out land reform, we see the appearance of a Vietnamese translation of the CCP writer Mã Phong's short story *Village Hatred* [Thù làng].[16] This work preceded all the works of DRV land reform fiction that I was able to find in the National Library in Hà Nội. Over a year later, in January of 1954, the VWP leaders began publishing in the *The People* translated passages from the Chinese writer Zhou Libo's *The Hurricane* [Mưa to giơ lớn] (1948).[17] This large novel about land reform in northern China had been translated into Russian and won the Stalin Prize for literature in 1952. Another Chinese influence on DRV land reform literature was the famous CCP film *The White-haired Woman* (1950), which had been adapted for Vietnamese audiences.

The first important Vietnamese narrative of the land reform, which seems to have served, along with the translated Chinese accounts, as a model for DRV fiction accounts of the campaign, was the trial of Ms. Nguyễn Thị Năm in the spring of 1953. Her case received extensive coverage in *The People* and remained a point of reference for the Party leaders when discussing the land reform throughout the campaign.[18] No doubt this is part of the reason why she is the most well known victim of the campaign today—she was the first person to be officially tried and shot as a landlord, with the Party leaders and their CCP advisers having carefully staged her trial. What has most intrigued Vietnamese about Nguyễn Thị Năm, though, is the fact that she was a loyal supporter of the Party and innocent of the bizarre and gruesome crimes of which she was accused and convicted at her trial. Thus after the campaign, the meaning of her case shifted from an official symbol of landlord treachery to an unofficial

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[13] This literature is still enjoyed by Vietnamese today, with books like *Chí Phèo*, *Tắt Đền*, *Giông Tố*, and *Bỉ vỏ* always available in major bookstores throughout the country. The "land reform literature," on the other hand, has been completely forgotten.

[14] A landlord from Vũ Trọng Phụng's novel *Giông tố* [The Storm] (1936).

[15] A landlord from Ngô Tất Tố's novel *Tắt Đèn* [Turn out the Light] (1939).

[16] Mã Phong, "Thù làng" [Village Hatred], translated from Chinese by Phan Khôi, (Việt Nam: Văn nghệ Trung ương, 1952).

[17] Chu Lập Ba [Zhou Libo], *Mưa to gió lớn* [The Hurricane], printed in *Nhân dân* [The People], no. 162, January 26, 1954.

[18] N.D., "Vụ Cát-Hanh-Long…" [The Case of Cát-Hanh-Long…], *Nhân dân* [The People], no. 97, March 1, 1953

popular symbol of the injustice that characterized the land reform in so many communities of northern Vietnam.

The official narrative of the campaign—the inveterate treachery of the landlord class, corrupted local party branches in need of purging, poor peasants being awakened [giác ngộ] to the notion of class struggle, and the construction of a new, joyous life in the countryside—continued up through the spring of 1956. In the early summer of that year, just as the land reform was finally finishing up, this narrative faded away for a few weeks. Then, as mentioned above, on August of 1956, Nguyễn Tất Thành (as Hồ Chí Minh) published his article in *The People* acknowledging the "errors" of the campaign and promising the North Vietnamese people a plan to correct them. As recently as early February, though, top Party leaders were still, in their typical linear approach, cautioning against deviations to the left and right, but definitely emphasizing "right deviations" (i.e. attacking the landlord class too weakly) as the greater problem.[19] Why had the VWP leadership's perception of the campaign changed?

The crucial factor seems to have been the CPSU 20th Congress, held in February of 1956,[20] during which Khrushchev delivered his legendary "secret speech" denouncing Stalin for just the sort of crimes that characterized the land reform: (among others) the use of torture to elicit false confessions, the use of quotas to determine targets for repression, and the complete abandonment of legal process so as to ensure rapid verdicts and punishments. Though not as directly related to the land reform as his long account of Stalin's role in the "Great Terror" of 1937-1938, Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin's personality cult in particular and personality cults in general (as insidious and demeaning institutions that were contrary to the spirit of Marxism) was also awkward for the VWP leaders, particularly Nguyễn Tất Thành. As noted above, he and the top Party leaders had worked hard to create a cult of personality around the character of "Uncle Hồ." How would these shocking ideas of Khrushchev's be explained to the Party rank and file? Understandably, the VWP leaders dragged their feet as long as possible before revealing to rank-and-file members what Khrushchev had said about Stalin's reign.[21]

After about five weeks, a clearer picture of what had happened during the CPSU 20th Congress became increasingly visible to Party intellectuals in Hà Nội. Some reform-minded DRV intellectuals appropriated Khrushchev's key phrases from the 20th Congress—"collective leadership," "inner-party democracy," "socialist legality," and even the "cult of personality"—and used them as a means of criticizing the land reform and other features of the party-state from the safe perspective of current Soviet orthodoxy.[22] Khrushchev's calls for reform along with Mao

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[19] See, for example, Nguyễn Duy Trinh, "Chỉ thị của Ban Bí thư, số 6/CT-TW, 27/1/1956, 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, On Strengthening Leadership over Party Reorganization and the Construction of Rural Branches during Wave 5 of the Land Reform], *VKDTT 1956*, 27-34, and Lê Văn Lương, "Chỉ thị của Ban Bí thư, số 5/CT-TW, 2/2/1956, Về việc chỉnh đốn cơ quan chỉ đạo cấp huyện trong cải cách ruộng đất" [Secretariat Directive on Reorganizing Leading Offices at the District Level during Land Reform], *VKDTT 1956*, 35-42.

[20] The CPSU 20th Congress was held from February 14-25, 1956.

[21] In fact, I am not sure whether the Party leaders ever translated and distributed the copy of the secret speech that was given to Trường Chinh and Lê Đức Thọ, who were in attendance at the congress. I have never seen or heard of the existence of a Vietnamese version of the speech. Judging from the diary of Nguyễn Huy Tưởng, it seems not to have been until April 1, when the VWP leaders published a translated version of a Pravda article on Stalin's personality cult, that DRV intellectuals began to understand what had happened at the 20th Congress.

[22] Some articles dealing either directly or indirectly with the land reform and its themes: "Chúng tôi phỏng vấn về vấn đề mở rộng tự do và dân chủ" [Our Interview on the Issue of Expanding Freedom and Democracy], Lê Đạt, "Nhân câu truyện mấy người tự tử" [On the Occasion of a Few People Committing Suicide], *Nhân văn* [Humanity], no. 1, September 20, 1956; Nguyễn Hữu Đang, "Cần phải chính quy hơn nữa" [We Need More Regularizing] and

Zedong's "Hundred Flowers" policy, the DRV's desperate need for Soviet and CCP aid, the specific conditions of the Geneva Accords, and the overall struggle between the two regimes in Hà Nội and Saigon for the "hearts and minds" of the Vietnamese people, worked together to create a feeling of uncertainty among the Party leaders. This uncertainty fed the hopes and confidence of many loyal, but critical, DRV intellectuals, inspiring them to press publicly for long-desired reforms.[23]

The "Correction of Errors" Phase of the Land Reform Discourse

From August 25 to October 5, the Party Central Committee met (secretly) at their 10th Plenum to discuss the situation.[24] What happened during these important meetings remains a tantalizing mystery, but it is likely that most of the discussion was focused on the issue of the land reform and how it was to be handled. One published document from the plenum, a draft of a Politburo report on the land reform to the Central Committee, seems to represent the high point of contrition from the top Party leaders. The report claims to Central Committee members that the "mistakes" of the land reform (both the attack on the landlord class and the parallel purge of local Party branches) were the result of top-level assessments of society having "not stemmed from reality." It speaks of having "studied the experience of a friendly country [the PRC] in a mechanistic way and not making the effort [không chịu] to research thoroughly our social situation in order to set concrete and appropriate policies." The report stated that the currently

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Trần Duy, "Thành thật đấu tranh cho tự do dân chủ" [Sincerely Struggle for Democratic Freedoms], *Nhân văn* [Humanity], no. 4, November 11, 1956; Nguyễn Hữu Đang, "Hiến pháp Việt Nam 1946 và Hiền pháp Trung Hoa bảo đảm tự do dân chủ thế nào?" [How do the Vietnamese Constitution of 1946 and the Chinese Constitution Guarantee Democratic Freedoms?] and Lê Đạt, "Bài học Ba-lan và Hung-ga-ri" [The Lesson of Poland and Hungary], and Trần Duy, "Góp ý kiến về phần tự do dân chủ trong Nghị quyết t.ư. lần thứ mười [Some Ideas on Part of the Tenth Central Committee Resolution Dealing with Democratic Freedom], *Nhân văn* [Humanity], no. 5, November 20, 1956; Phan Khôi, "Phê bình lãnh đạo văn nghệ" [A Critique of the Literature and Arts Leadership], *Giai phẩm mùa thu tập 1* [Masterworks of Autumn, vol. 1], Trương Tửu, "Bệnh sùng bái cá nhân trong giới lãnh đạo văn nghệ" [The Cult of Personality within the Literature and Arts Leadership], *Giai phẩm mùa thu tập 2* [Masterworks of Autumn, vol. 2], Trần Đức Thảo, "Nội dung xã hội và hình thức tự do" [The Content of Society and the Form of Freedom], and Nguyễn Mạnh Tưởng, "Hai câu chuyện" [Two Stories], *Giai phẩm mùa đông* [Masterworks of Winter], Trăm Hoa, "Một vấn đề chính trị trọng yếu" [A Crucial Political Problem], *Trăm hoa* [Hundred Flowers], no. 5, November 25, 1956.

[23] Here I am referring to the much studied "Nhân văn-Giai phẩm" [Humanity-Master Works] movement. For information on this movement of intellectual protest in the DRV, see Hirohide Kurihara, "Changes in the Literary Policy of the Vietnamese Workers' Party, 1956-1958," in Takashi Shiraishi and Motoo Furata, eds., *Indochina in the 1940s and 1950s* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 1992), 165-196; Georges Boudarel, "Intellectual Dissidence in the 1950s: The Nhân văn-Giai phẩm Affair," trans. and ed. by Phi-Linh Baneth, in *The Vietnam Forum*, no. 13 (1990), 154-174; Kim Ninh, *A World Transformed: The Politics of Culture in Revolutionary Vietnam* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), ch. 4; Heinz Schutte, "Hundred Flowers in Vietnam, 1955-1957" (paper presented at annual meeting of the Association of Asian Studies, New York, March 28, 2003); Peter Zinoman, "Nhân văn-Giai phẩm and Vietnamese 'Reform Communism' in the 1950s: A Revisionist Interpretation," *The Journal of Cold War Studies* (Cambridge: MIT Press, vol 13, no. 1, winter 2011), 60-100; and Thụy Khuê, *Nhân văn-Giai phẩm* (

[24] The Party newspaper *The People* describes the meeting as having been one of the "Central Executive Committee" rather the larger "Central Committee." In the *Văn kiện Đảng* series, the meeting is referred to as one of the "Central Committee." The meeting received no press coverage and was apparently secret, with the announcement of its official resolution occurring three weeks after it apparently ended.

used ratio of landlords in society, 5.86 perecent, "needed to be checked again," as if the figure had been determined originally with the utmost care.[25]

On October 30th and 31st, twenty-five days after the 10th Plenum had concluded, the Party leaders published in *The People* two successive articles on the land reform. (Why there was this long delay in the publication of these two articles is one of the intriguing questions surrounding the 10th Plenum.) The first article was a "communique" [thông cáo] that provided excerpts from the official (internal) resolution of the 10th Plenum.[26] Attached to this communique was the announcement that Hồ Chí Minh had been "unanimously elected" to take over as Party general-secretary for Trường Chinh, who, it was said, "had responsibility for the errors of the land reform," had carried out "self criticism" before the Central Committee, and had "asked to resign" from his position as general secretary.[27] The second was a copy of a long speech dealing primarily with the land reform that was delivered by Võ Nguyên Giáp in Hà Nội two days previously.[28] A careful analysis of these four reports suggests that the latter three were written carefully by the Party leaders to shift blame for the land reform away from themselves and toward the cadres carrying out the campaign.[29]

The big idea of these and all subsequent reports was to depict any acknowledged "shortcomings" and "mistakes" of the Party leadership as honest ones. A central argument of this dissertation is that these were not honest mistakes. I argue that the Party leaders knew from the very beginning, just as Mao had known during his later land reform campaigns in the People's Republic of China (PRC), that "5.68 percent" as the number of "landlords" in the northern Vietnamese countryside was a fantasy. And they knew that the vast majority of rural Party

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[25] "Đề cương báo cáo...." *VKDTT 1956*, 418-474.

[26] "Thông cáo của Hội nghị lần thứ 10 (mở rộng) của Ban Chấp hành Trung ương Đảng Lao động Việt Nam" [Communique from the 10th Plenum (expanded) of VWP Central Executive Committee], *Nhân dân*, no. 969, October 30, 1956.

[27] Also disciplined for the "errors" of the land reform were three Central Committee members who had had high profile roles in the campaign: Hồ Viết Thắng (Standing member [thường trực] of Central Land Reform Committee's Party committee); Lê Văn Lương (Politburo member, on the Secretariat of the Party Executive, Head of the Party's Central Orgburo [Trưởng Ban tổ chức Trung ương]—Lương was in charge of the "Party reorganization." He would be replaced by Lê Đức Thọ); Hoàng Quốc Việt (Politburo member and Head of People's Mobilization" [Trưởng Ban dân vận]. He had also played a key role in the rectification (chỉnh huấn) campaign used to psychologically preprare people recruited to serve as land reform cadres). See announcement in *The People*: "Thông cáo của Hội nghị lần thứ 10 của Ban cháp hành Trung ương Đảng lao động Việt Nam về việc thi hành kỷ luật đối với những đồng chí ủy viên Trung ương phạm sai lầm trong việc chỉ đạo công tác cải cách ruộng đất và chỉnh đốn tổ chức" [Communique of the 10th VWP Plenum on the Disciplinary Measures Meted out to Central Committee Members who Committed Errors in the Leadership of Land Reform and Party Reorganization Work], *Nhân dân* [The People], no. 969, October 30, 1956.

[28] Võ Nguyên Giáp, "Bài nói chuyện của đồng chí Võ Nguyên Giáp, ủy viên của Bộ Chính trị Truung ương Đảng Lao động Việt Nam về nghị quyết của Hội nghị Trung ương lần thứ 10 tại cuộc mít tinh 29/10/1956 của nhân dân thủ đâu. [Talk Given by Comrade Võ Nguyên Giáp, member of the Vietnamese Labor Party Politbuo, Regarding the Resolution of the 10th Central Committee Plenum at the 29/10/1956 Meeting of People of the Capital], *Nhân dân* [The People], no. 979, October 31, 1956.

[29] The four reports are: 1) "Draft Report of the Politburo," *VKDTT 1956*, 418-474; 2) "Resolution of the 10th Plenum," *VKDTT 1956*, 536-586; and the two reports published in *The People* for public consumption: 3) "Communique from the 10th Plenum…" (expanded), *Nhân dân*, October 30, 1956; and 4) Võ Nguyễn Giáp, "Speech," *Nhân dân*, October 31, 1956. For example, the "Draft Report of the Politburo" speaks candidly about the fact that the Party leaders had come up the "5.68" percentage to serve as a guide during the land reform for determining how many people in a community should be classified as landlords. That crucial fact was not included in the latter three articles, which attempted to suggest that it was the cadres themselves who had "overestimated the enemy." Giáp's famous article on the land reform is analyzed carefully at the end of the dissertation.

branches and their members were loyal to the regime, not two-faced saboteurs. In my opinion, it is precisely the Party leadership's knowledge of the "actual situation" on the ground that explains most of the peculiarities of how the land reform apparatus was set up—the method of indoctrinating and training land reform cadres, the creation of a special legal system to serve the campaign, the use of a quota system for determining targets, and the overall breakneck pace at which the campaign was carried out. These and other features suggest that the Party leaders who set up the land reform knew that facts on the ground would not bear out the official narrative on which the campaign was based. As such, the adoption of any legal devices (such as the 'right of appeal') that might slow down the campaign and provide those involved at the local level with an opportunity to gather evidence and have it considered by a disinterested judge or jury was sure to kill the land reform. And the Party leaders were careful to avoid implementing any such measures.

With the blame for the land reform's violence and injustices focused on those entrusted with carrying out the policy (the roughly 40,000 land reform cadres) and, to a lesser extent, on a handful of top-Party scapegoats, Nguyễn Tất Thành and other Party leaders allowed a change in the way the land reform was to be depicted by DRV intellectuals. From the end of the 10th Party plenum in November 1956 to roughly the summer of 1957, in keeping with the spirit of destalinization at the time, the VWP leaders allowed DRV intellectuals to write critically about the campaign. By the end of December, though, the DRV intellectual community was reeling from the turmoil surrounding the regime's crackdown on those intellectuals who had broken with Party rules and established their own independent publications. Probably as a result of what had happened to those who had stuck their necks out to complain, a mood of fear set in among the intellectual community, curbing creative production.[30] During this brief phase, two important works of 'correction of errors fiction' were produced, *Coming Wedding* [Sắp cưới][31] and *Those Stormy Days* [Những ngày bão táp],[32] by Vũ Bão and Hữu Mai respectively.

Both of these 'correction of errors novels' strongly revised the image of the countryside expressed in the original 'land reform fiction,' no longer engaging in the extreme demonization of local elites (the so-called "landlords") or portraying members of local Party branches as two-faced saboteurs. Indeed, in both novels, the authors depict local Party activists as loyal patriots wrongly accused of being traitors by misguided land reform cadres. Both novels, at least outwardly, conform to the official explanation of the campaign's violence advanced in the Võ Nguyên Giáp speech.

Ultimately, the novels reflect unspoken official ground rules about how the land reform could be depicted—ground rules that remain more or less in effect to this day. Their narratives were confined mostly to a village and avoided any probe into the high politics of the campaign except in a way that would exonerate the top Party leaders of responsibility. Vũ Bão and Hữu

[30] A good sense of the atmosphere at the time can be gained from the diaries of the DRV writers Nguyễn Huy Tưởng, *Nhật ký: Nghệ sĩ và công dân* [Diary: Artist and Citizen] (Hà Nội: Thanh niên, 2006), and Trần Dần, *Ghi* [Notes] (Westminster: Văn nghệ, 1996). Two other interesting accounts of the period are Gerard Tongas, *J'ai vecu dans l'enfer communiste au Nord Viêt-Nam et j'ai choisi là liberte* (Paris: Nouvelles Editions Debresse, 1960; and Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh, *Hồi ký* [Memoir] (published on the internet, 2007). See Mạnh's description of his experience being a literature student at the National University of Hà Nội during 1956 and 1957. was interesting memoir, published 2423432 years ago, also has an interesting description of the time. Manh remembers the powerful DRV intellectual Dang Thai Mai during this period more or less afraid to teach anything during class.

[31] Vũ Bão, *Sắp cưới* [Coming Wedding] (Hà Nội: Hội nhà văn, 1957).

[32] Hữu Mai, *Những ngày bão táp* [Those Stormy Days] (Hà Nội: Văn nghệ, 1957).

Mai were permitted to depict the campaign's injustices and the use of torture, but these had to be described as deviations not sanctioned by the top Party leaders.

Re-stalinization (mid-1957)

By the summer of 1957, the VWP leaders were starting to feel more comfortable with the situation in the socialist bloc. The Soviet army had crushed the uprising in Hungary (a move lauded enthusiastically by the DRV leaders).[33] Mao had left behind his 100 Flowers policy and was now engaging in an anti-rightist campaign to punish his critics. Back in December, the DRV leaders had struck back at their own critics, shutting down the handful of reform-oriented independent periodicals that had sprung up during the high tide of destalinization in 1956.[34] The Party leaders kept up with their "correction of errors" program, but were determination to push forward with agricultural collectivization in 1958, essentially nullifying the economic principle on which land reform was supposedly based (expansion of private property). This meant that there was little point in devoting time and energy to the issue of whose plot of land belonged to whom or what the actual tax base (i.e. estimated yield) of a person's property should be. The DRV leaders were constructing socialism, which meant eliminating the system of private property in the countryside, and having all harvested rice be managed by the state.

By early 1960, with collectivization of the entire North mostly complete, the spirit of destalinization and the "correction of errors" had all but disappeared. In a speech celebrating the founding of the Communist Party, the former Party general-secretary, Trường Chinh, summed up the land reform as follows:

> *With regard to the feudal forces,* we judged that, as far as class was concerned, the landlord class was the enemy of the people's national democratic revolution and therefore had to be overthrown. But tactically, it was necessary to completely split up the ranks of the landlord class. First, we attacked the most reactionary and influential landlord ringleaders who worked as special agents of the imperialists; we made use of [tranh thủ] those landlords who had some sort of conflict of interest with the imperialists, and we neutralized those landlords who were sitting on the fence. As such, we implemented a step-by-step land policy. At times, we temporarily shelved the slogan "confiscate the land of the landlords and distribute it to the peasants" and used only the slogans, "confiscate the lands of the imperialists and the Vietnamese traitors and distribute it to the poor peasants," "distribute public lands," "reduce rents and debts." Only afterward did we move forward with true land reform in order to implement the slogan 'land to the tiller.' Right in the middle of the land reform, we were clear in our policy: Under the premise of overthrowing the entire landlord class, of dividing up the landlord class to the highest degree, of using the three methods of confiscation, requisition, and forced purchase of landlord's land, livestock, and farm equipment, according to the political attitude of each category of landlord. Our policy was also to leave for landlords and their families some land so that they could reform themselves through labor, becoming new people.

[33] See the articles about Hungary in the November 6 and 7 issues of *The People*, particularly "Chức mừng thắng lợi vĩ đại của nhân dân Hung-ga-ri" [Congratulations to the People of Hungary for their Great Victory], *Nhân dân* [The People], no. 976, November 6, 1956.

[34] Those publications were the following: *Giai phẩm* [Master Works] 1-5, *Nhân văn* [Humanity] 1-5, *Trăm hoa* [100 Flowers], *Đất mới* [New Land], *Sáng tạo* [Creativity], and *Tập san phê bình* [Literary Review].

> In the execution of the above policy, there were times when we made mistakes, but basically our policy was correct and implemented correctly. It was for that very reason that we were able to complete the people's democratic revolution in one half of our country.
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> […]
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> Today, looking back, we see that the implementation of the antifeudal task, the land task, in a step-by-step manner, was basically correct. The shortcomings and mistakes were local and temporary. That is because we based [our policy] on the actual situation in Vietnam…[35]

The tone of contrition that appeared in the discourse immediately following the 10th Plenum had been almost entirely abandoned, replaced by a tone of righteous self-satisfaction. Gone was the notion that the Party leaders had overestimated the size and strength of both the landlord class and other alleged enemies of the regime.

For about a decade, the Party leaders saw no practical reason to have DRV intellectuals devote significant time to thinking about the land reform. That changed in 1967 when they commissioned one of their leading theorists, Trần Phương, to produce a large book about the history of the Party's land policy. Titled *Land Revolution in Vietnam* [Cách mạng ruộng đất ở Việt Nam], Phương's book held closely to the "errors/deviation" paradigm in its explanations for the campaign's violence.[36] The policies had been correct, with trouble arising primarily in their implementation. "Leftist errors" became widespread toward the end of the campaign, but the Party leaders did not "discover" [phát hiện] them until it was too late. Again, the big idea was the notion of the 'honest mistake.' And, again, the "5.68 percent," set by the Party leaders to ensure that the campaign would have enough targets for struggle, was missing. Trần Phương's book was the last significant discourse on the land reform for the next eighteen years.[37]

The Land Reform after "New Change" (1986)

Following the Party's introduction of New Change [Đổi mới] in 1986, Vietnamese intellectuals were allowed to visit the land reform in fictional accounts of the period.[38] For the most part, these accounts followed the rules that seemed to shape the two "correction of errors" novels: stay away from high politics except in a way that exonerates the top Party leaders

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[35] Trường Chinh, *Tiến lên dưới lá cờ của Đảng* [Advance under the Party's Flag], 1960, printed in *Trường Chinh tuyển tập (1955-1975)* [Selected Works of Trường Chinh] (Hà Nội: Chính trị quốc gia, 2009), 609-610.

[36] Trần Phương, *Cách mạng ruộng đất ở Việt Nam* [Land Revolution in Vietnam] (Hà Nội: Khoa học xã hội, 1968). See pages 195-199 for a pithy summary of Trần Phương's reasons why "errors" were committed during the campaign.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Books either about the land reform or featuring the campaign in their narrative: Dương Thu Hương, *Những thiên đường mù* [Paradise of the Blind] (1988), Tạ Duy Anh, "Bước qua lời nguyền" (1989) and "Lão Khổ" [Wretched Old Man] (1992); Ngô Ngọc Bội, *Ác Mộng* [Nightmare] (1990); Dương Hướng, *Bến Không Chồng* [Port with No Husbands] (1990); Đào Thắng, *Giòng Sông Mía* [A River of Sugarcane] (2004); Tô Hoài, *Ba Người Khác* [Three Others] (2006); Hoàng Minh Tường, *Thời của thánh thần* [Time of the Saints] (2008); Nguyễn Khắc Phê, *Biết dâu địa ngục thiên đường* [Heaven or Hell?] (2011); Nguyễn Xuân Khánh, *Đội gạo lên chùa* [Carry Rice to the Pagoda] (2011). Võ Văn Trực's novel *Chuyện làng ngày ấy* [Village Story] (1993) and *Cọng rêu dưới đáy ao* [Patch of Moss on a Pond's Bottom] (2007); Nguyễn Khoa Đăng, *Nước mắt một thời* [Tears of a Time] (2009), Trần Thế Nhân, *Ngày long trời đêm lở đất* [Trembling Sky by Day, Splitting Earth by Night] (2010). One of the best works on this list, Võ Văn Trực's *Chuyện làng ngày ấy*, is actually about an episode that occurred before the land reform (the "political struggle" [đấu tranh chính trị] of 1952). But this episode, which took place in Thanh Hóa and Trực's native Nghệ An province, involved some of the same features that would come into play during the land reform.

(particularly Hồ Chí Minh), keep the narrative localized within one community, and depict some of the negative phenomena of the land reform, but not in a way that overtly challenged the "errors/deviations" explanatory paradigm. One general idea about the campaign conveyed collectively by these works of fiction is that the prospect of land reform filled the vast majority of people in the countryside with fear and foreboding. Land reform cadres were not welcomed joyously by villagers as appears in the narratives of the land reform literature created to serve the campaign.

Of the New Change works dealing directly with the land reform, Ngô Ngọc Bội's *Nightmare* [Ác mộng] (1986) and Tô Hoài's *Three Others* [Ba người khác] (2006) are especially significant because both authors served as land reform cadres. These two novels provide a more detailed view of how the land reform apparatus functioned as an institution. Among other things, Bội and Hoài show the enormous pressure put on land reform cadres to find targets of struggle.

Since this New Change land reform literature came out three decades after the end of the campaign, it was possible to address the issue of the long-term impact of the campaign on local communities, particularly the families of those most directly affected. Here the works of Dương Thư Hương, Tạ Duy Anh, Dương Hướng, Lê Minh Khuê, and Đào Thắng are of particular note, showing that the legacy of the campaign lingered on for decades.

Two Recent SRV Historical Accounts of the Land Reform

Đặng Phong's *The Economic History of Vietnam: 1945-2000* (2005)

In the last decade, a handful of Vietnamese historians have provided brief sketches of the land reform. While these accounts do add some interesting new details to the earlier historical accounts from the 1950s and 1960s, in my opinion they fall far behind the value of the more detailed historical fiction accounts of the land reform. The problem for the Party historians is that they are much more encumbered by the 'rules of engagement' concerning the high politics of the land reform than are the historical fiction writers, who can avoid the issue by keeping the focus on the view 'from below,' where there is much more room for maneuver.

The second volume of the 2005 study by social scientist Đặng Phong, *Vietnamese Economic History: 1945-2000*, for example, has a brief chapter on the land reform where the official explanation for the campaign's violence may be seen expressed in one of its most recent incarnations:

> However, these [mass mobilization] movements [of rent reduction and land reform] committed serious leftist errors that were discovered in 1956 and described statistically as follows: Of the 3,563 communes that underwent the eight waves of mass mobilization and the five waves of land reform, the number of people falsely accused comprised a very high percentage. And the figure of 5.68 as the percentage of a local community to be marked as landlords was higher than reality.
>
> […]
>
> However, when speaking of the mistakes in the land reform, one needs to distinguish between the mistakes of the policy and mistakes that resulted from spontaneous developments at the local level [cơ sở]. There were many spontaneous methods that were commonly used and spread widely at the local level such as: Using repression [truy bức] to "boost" the ratio of landlords to over 5 percent of the local population as though it were a mandatory goal; using forms of physical abuse on people such as beating them, tying them up, or locking them in

> stocks when a court was not yet available to try them; and inciting and threatening the masses so that they falsely denounce victims. Those are things that could not have been a part of the Central Committee's line and policy.[39]

Restricted by the imperative of distancing the top Party leaders from such negative phenomena, Vietnamese historians must leave, unexamined, basic questions raised by some of the details in their descriptions. For example, what was the origin of that figure, "5.68," which was intended to indicate the percentage of the population comprised by the landlord class? If it was indeed "higher than reality," why was that the case? How was that number derived? Since the number was only an estimate, why was it deemed necessary (by the Party leaders?) to include the tenths and even the hundredths units (i.e. the ".68")? Why were land reform cadres supplied with a "percentage" of landlords in the first place? Surely they had basic class demarcation criteria to follow—why was that not enough? What made the cadres feel that they needed to follow the percentage?[40]

Sometimes, Đặng Phong's effort to exonerate the Party leaders for one thing ends up indirectly implicating them for something else. For example, he writes that Hồ Chí Minh had reminded cadres on February 19, 1956 (four months before the end of the campaign, to "avoid allowing the use of torture to happen" and to "avoid forcing the issue [gò] with respect to making sure that landlords comprise 5 %."[41] In the first of the two paragraphs above, when the correctness of the "5.68 percent" was the issue, it had been dangled ownerless in the sentence. The sentences about Hồ Chí Minh, however, clearly affirm that the "5 %" was the policy of the top Party leaders and that they knew of the use of torture in the campaign. Also, Phong provides no comment on the language used by Nguyễn Tất Thành—why did he use the weak work "avoid" [tránh] when speaking of torture? Why not say that torture is 'absolutely forbidden' and threaten some sort of punishment for those who practice it?

While remaining overtly faithful to the official narrative of errors and deviations, the chapter from *Vietnamese Economic History* does make some interesting points about the information in the officially sanctioned documents that he used. For example, relying on the figures put forward in the above-mentioned "Draft Politburo Report" from September 1956, Đặng Phong notes that 109,816 people were classified by cadres as landlords. But it is not clear what the relationship of this number is to the 5.68 target percentage of landlords for the whole population. Đặng Phong states that the population of the DRV that underwent land reform was about ten million people. Five percent of ten million is 500,000, much higher than the 109,816 that the Party leaders put in their "Draft Politburo Report." The disparity could be explained if the number 109,816 represented only the heads of household who were actually tried in the "special people's courts" for being "landlords." But the label of "landlord" was applied to the whole family, not just the head of household. While the children of a landlord were not tried and shot, they did suffer terrible stigmatization afterwards for their assigned class background, not to mention the trauma of seeing one or both parents become the target of struggle. There is no mention of this aspect of the campaign in the chapter's discussion of its "errors" and victims.

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[39] Đặng Phong, *Lịch sử kinh tế Việt Nam: 1945-2000* [The Economic History of Việt Nam], vol. 2, 1955-1975, (Hà Nội: Khoa học xã hội, 2005), 86.
[40] Ibid, 85.
[41] Ibid, 86. Taken from *Nội sản cải cách ruộng đất* [Land Reform Internal Journal], no. 15, February 19, 1956. This article does not appear in the *Hồ Chí Minh's Collected Works* series.

With respect to land redistribution statistics, Đặng Phong points out (once again basing himself on the "Draft Politburo Report") that the process of confiscating and redistributing property had been happening all throughout the eight years leading up to the start of the land reform in 1953. The campaign itself, claims Phong, despite all its "noise" [rầm rộ] about giving land to the poor, actually only saw the redistribution of 26.3 percent of the total land that was provided to the rural poor over the period from the Party's seizure of power in 1945 to the end of the land reform in the middle of 1956.[42] Even if these land redistribution statistics are only broadly accurate, they call into question the crucial economic justification for the land reform promoted tirelessly during the campaign by the DRV leaders. What had been the economic impact of all those earlier land distributions that were three times greater than the distributions made during the land reform? If the redistribution of virtually all of the land of the wealthiest five percent of the northern Vietnamese countryside between 1953 and 1956 had barely reached a third of all the land redistributed during the period from 1945-1952, how could the Party leaders have asserted that the landlord class was a major force in the DRV economy during 1953-1956? If this statistic of modest land redistributions during the land reform is accurate, why had it not set off alarm bells in the minds of the Party leaders after the first one or two years of the three-year campaign? The chapter from *Vietnamese Economic History* provides no investigation of these issues, despite their obvious economic and historical significance.

A key part of the official version of the land reform is the fact that during October 1956, after five weeks of meetings of the Party Central Committee at its 10th Plenum, the Party leaders publicly apologized for the campaign's "errors" and "deviations," disciplined and demoted four high-ranking members, and promised to "correct" the campaign's "mistakes." Once again, the rules of engagement appear to severely restrict *The Economic History of Vietnam's* account. Under the subheading, "Discovering the errors and correcting the mistakes," Đặng Phong breezes through his explanation as follows: "After international and domestic events that occurred in the beginning of 1956, especially the influence of the CPSU 20th Congress, in roughly the middle of 1956, mainly during the highpoint of the land reform and the [Party] reorganization, it appears that there was a 'sudden awakening': Mistake!" The explanation gives significant agency to the CPSU's 20th Congress in inspiring the "sudden awakening" to the "errors" of the land reform. But there is no discussion about what happened at the 20th Congress other than to say that Stalin's personality cult was denounced. As for why this mattered in the Vietnamese context, and how, in particular, it related to the land reform and the thinking of the Party leaders, we are left to wonder. Would there have been such an awakening if the CPSU 20th Congress had not occurred?

The SRV Historical Magazine, *Past and Present* (2007)

The official narrative of cadre deviations and top Party "discovery" of them is, here and there, wielded like a protective shield in the progressive SRV historical magazine *Past and Present's* December 2007 issue, which was devoted entirely to the land reform. As with the chapter from *The Economic History of Vietnam*, the official narrative of deviations expressed in *Past and Present* sits uneasily with a number of key details about the campaign that appear in the magazine's various articles. Indeed, if the details are considered carefully, it almost appears as though the contributors to the issue had quietly embedded within the magazine a counter-

[42] Ibid, 85.

narrative of the land reform that is much closer, in my opinion, to the historical truth, but which would surely cause the editors to lose their jobs if expressed overtly.

For example, the historian and chief editor, Dương Trung Quốc, in his introductory article, pieces together policy statements made by Nguyễn Tất Thành (usually speaking as the voice of Hồ Chí Minh) during moderate stages of the revolutionary process to make him appear more like a left-oriented Western democrat than a Communist revolutionary. The implication is that he was not actually a proponent of the type of violent class warfare that accompanied the land reform. Dozens of other policy statements written by Thành (frequently under aliases other than "Hồ Chí Minh") that expressed much more radical views and vigorously promoted the land reform are left out of the picture.

Yet, this is not entirely the case in the magazine. In the issue's "Letter from the editor," Dương Trung Quốc provides a quote from Nguyễn Tất Thành that casts doubt on this image of him as a moderate. To fellow comrades in his native Nghệ An province on September 17, 1945, just a few weeks after the Party seized power, Thành wrote (as quoted by Dương Trung Quốc):

> The destructive work is finished. Now comes the first step of the task of cleaning up, setting up, protecting, and building. Ah! This is the work that is truly difficult, of course! During the destructive work of fighting the enemy and demanding independence, it is easy to recruit the entire people. During the constructive work, it is harder to recruit people because the work bumps up against the interests of one or two classes. […][43]

The quote provided by Quốc suggests that Nguyễn Tất Thành saw the revolutionary process in the classic Leninist "two-stage" framework designed for colonized peoples. During the first, "bourgeois democratic" stage, the Communist Party would conceal its long-term social goals and focus on rallying all classes to the cause of national independence. When the colonizers had been expelled and independence established, the second "socialist" stage would begin. During this "more difficult" stage, the Party would focus on eliminating class exploitation and constructing socialism.

Another interesting part of the *Past and Present* issue on the land reform that seems to undermine the official narrative of the campaign is a June 19, 1953 letter written by the DRV literary scholar Đặng Thai Mai to the Party General Secretary, Trường Chinh. One of the fundamental tenets of the land reform was that all peasant suffering stemmed from landlord exploitation. (Noticeably absent from this equation of exploitation was the DRV state, whose exactions in rice and manpower were enormous.) Therefore, overthrowing the landlord class and distributing their land to the peasants should earn the party-state the gratitude and loyalty of the rural poor. (The weakness of this economic justification we have already seen in the claim by *The Economic History of Vietnam* that the amount of land distributed to peasants during the period from 1945-1952 was three times the amount distributed during the land reform. How could the Party leaders have actually believed that one third of what apparently did not bring about adequate poor-peasant appreciation for the regime between 1945 and 1952 would succeed in winning their hearts between 1953 and 1956?)

Đặng Thai Mai's extremely deferential letter of complaint to Trường Chinh, written from Nghệ An province in Central Vietnam, also suggests that this narrative of peasant hardship caused by landlord exploitation was largely imaginary by 1953. The much more meaningful

[43] Dương Trung Quốc, "Thư tòa soạn" [Letter from the Editor], *Xưa và nay* [Past and Present], no. 297, December 2007.

issue for peasants was the Party's tax burden on them, not rents demanded by local landlords. It needs to be mentioned as background information to Đặng Thai Mai's letter that the Party calculated its agricultural tax as a percentage of a piece of land's estimated yield, which was set by Party cadres according to needs communicated to them from people farther up the chain of power. This tax system was supposed to encourage peasants to be more productive by punishing them for producing less than the estimated yield (i.e. having to hand over a greater percentage of their total crop to the state) and rewarding them for producing more than the estimated yield (i.e. letting them keep a greater percentage of the harvest for their own consumption).

> 1. On the issue of the 1953 agricultural tax, I put forward a few ideas in my last letter. Now, after having inspected the situation with my own eyes, having asked a few comrades, and having enquired among members of the [peasant] masses, I hope that you will pay attention to the issue of the tax rate. Maybe there needs to be a revision [emphasis in original] of the yield levels in Nghệ An. In 1951, four loads [gánh] of harvested rice stalk were considered to produce one tạ worth of processed rice. In 1952, the province [leaders] set the tax level for the districts. And the districts divided up [the tax burden] among the communes. There are communes that have calculated one tạ as two and a half loads, while most have calculated it as three loads. It is the same in Hà Tĩnh province. As a result, there are communes where one mẫu of land has been calculated to have a yield level of 32 or 35 tạ. In past times, one mẫu of the best quality land only yielded 25 to 28 tạ at the most. I asked many peasants about farming 1 or 2 mẫu of paddy and they all said that there was no way of achieving the yield [set for them by the state]. I dare to put forward this problem here because I have followed the issue in my region quite carefully. And the truth is that this year I have heard many people complaining a lot about the attitude of cadres when carrying out the work of setting yield levels… [44]

Arguably the most interesting and historically valuable part of the *Past and Present* issue devoted to the *land reform* is a passage from the diary of the revolutionary historian, Trần Huy Liệu, describing in considerable detail a public "struggle session" [hội nghị đấu tranh] that he attended on May 18, 1953. Some of the implications of his account can be grasped with little more than a basic knowledge of the campaign and the application of common sense.

First of all, the date of the struggle session was May 18, 1953, which meant that it took place during the first few months of the campaign, when it was tightly managed by the top Party leaders and carried out on a small scale in Thái Nguyên province, the location of the secret Party headquarters. Second, Trần Huy Liệu described the presence of a movie camera on scene to film the proceedings and even a refreshment stand of sorts to sell food to Party and government members in attendance, indicating that this was no ordinary struggle session but rather one that had been planned to be used for educational and propaganda purposes. The "chairman" in charge of running the struggle session, Liệu noted, instructed the roughly 700 villagers in attendance not to turn and look at the camera when it began filming (and making its "se se" sound) but rather to focus on showing their hatred of the landlords. As Liệu described at the time:

> The chairman gave orders to the audience that whenever a landlord was led in they should shout "down with the landlord" [hô đả đào]. This is something that should not be necessary to

[44] Đặng Thai Mai, "Thư gửi đồng chí Trường Chinh" [Letter to Comrade Trường Chinh], *Xưa và nay* [Past and Present], no. 297, December 2007, 27-28.

> order! Then it came time for the landlord to enter. Though his hands were tied behind his back, he still had to crawl from outside into [the stage area], carrying on his person bundles of clothing. In addition to the shouts of "down with the landlord," many people sitting next to the path along which he had to crawl toward the stage reached out with their hands to slap and punch him. Not waiting for the landlord to kneel on the stage, one person grabbed him by his hair and began to "denounce" [tố] him. The typhoon had begun.[45]

Trần Huy Liệu's account then shifted to an analysis of the actual case against the alleged "cruel and despotic landlord," who was the leader of the local Party cell, and it is clear that the DRV historian considered the case to be extremely weak to the point of being "ridiculous" at times. One female denouncer, showing obvious signs of having been coached, pointed to new clothes she was wearing and said to the "landlord," "Today I only have these good clothes to wear because of Chairman Hồ, the Party, and the Government; of course if I had continued to live in your house my ass would have been naked for my whole life." Liệu noted in his diary that some peasants, after denouncing and slapping the landlord, would look over to one of the land reform cadres as if to guage his satisfaction with their performance. A few paragraphs later, the DRV historian observed that many of the denunciations seemed to have nothing to do with class. "If on that day a complete stranger had come from afar to witness [the struggle session], he would not have known whether Mr. B. was a cruel despotic landlord or not. And he would not have understood why [Mr. B.] had to be brought forward for struggle."

Trần Huy Liệu did not describe the use of torture behind the scenes to encourage the landlord to confess to the questionable accusations leveled against him, but the physical abuse meted out to "Mr. B" during the struggle session itself is striking.

> Aside from the punishment of frequently forcing the offender to kneel, people hit him brutally. Everyone who went up to denounce [the landlord], according to habit and in imitation of each other, would grab his hair in order to yank his head back and ask a question. After a few questions that went nowhere, the denouncer would realize how disgraceful he had been, conclude his session with a slap, and step down from the stage. There were people who punched the offender in the ear. Others kicked him in the stomach. When seeing this, the Chairman of the land reform brigade or a few people on the outside would only advise [the denouncers] gently, "No need to hit him," or "Hitting him will only dirty your hands." […][46]

This graphic account, written three years before the official "discovery" of the campaign's errors, indicates that the physical brutality of the land reform, its false accusations, and its heavily stage-managed character, were present from the earliest days of the campaign. These features must have had something to do with the actual policies instituted by the top Party leaders and the training devised for cadres carrying out the campaign.

Western Scholarship on the Land Reform

In May 1969, the Nixon Administration began to use the North Vietnamese land reform to justify continued U.S. military support for South Vietnam, raising people's awareness of the

[45] Trần Huy Liệu, "Ghi chép trong Cải cách ruộng đất" [Notes Taken during the Land Reform], printed in *Xưa và nay* [Past and Present], no. 297, December 2007.
[46] Ibid.

campaign and stirring up intense scholarly debate over what had happened. In 1968, particularly in the wake of the Tet Offensive, opposition to the war in Vietnam had begun to grow stronger in the United States.

Not only did things appear to be going badly on the military front, but some of the original justifications for U.S. intervention seemed no longer to apply. For example, the "domino theory" had lost some of its punch in late 1965 when the conservative anti-communist general Suharto took control over Indonesia, which was by far the largest and most strategically important country in Southeast Asia. Indonesia had had a thriving Communist movement at the time, and Suharto attacked it mercilessly after seizing power. In one of the worst crimes of the Cold War, the Indonesian general sanctioned the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of communists and communist-sympathizers (both real and imagined).[47] This ended any real concern that Indonesia, the giant of Southeast Asia, would join the Communist bloc.[48] To some extent, the domino theory also depended on the notion of a monolithic Communist bloc. By 1969, though, when Nixon took office, the Chinese and Soviets were skirmishing with each other periodically on their common border. This was in addition to the steady stream of insults hurled at one another in the media.

In this context, it is not surprising that Nixon's justification for continued U.S. military involvement in South Vietnam increasingly focused on what a Communist victory would mean for America's South Vietnamese allies. In a May 13, 1969 speech, he claimed to the American people that the abandonment of South Vietnam would "risk a massacre that would shock and dismay everyone in the world who values human life."[49] Three days later, the famous conservative columnist Joseph Alsop, a militant anti-communist, wrote an article lauding Nixon's resolve on Vietnam. He elaborated on the President's idea about the threat of Communist reprisals in South Vietnam, predicting that "at least a million South Vietnamese would be doomed to prompt execution in the event of a nationwide Communist takeover. And this is quite in line, in turn, with the bloodbath that occurred in the north after the Communist takeover there."[50]

It appears that Alsop's May 16 column, with its use of the powerful word "bloodbath" to refer to the DRV's land reform, was the impetus for the adoption of the term "bloodbath theory."[51] That theory turned the land reform into a predictive model for what would happen in South Vietnam should it fall to the Communists. As can be seen in Alsop's article, this argument enabled those who favored continuing American military involvement to claim that morality was on their side, that a continuation of the fighting would be less costly in terms of human life than an abrupt peace that left the Communists in control of South Vietnam's destiny. Obviously, the

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[47] The most convincing account is John Roosa, *Pretext for Mass Murder: The September 30th Movement and Suharto's Coup d'Etat in Indonesia* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2006). For those interested, I also recommend Joshua Oppenheimer's intriguing documentary *The Act of Killing*.

[48] Perhaps sensing his opportunity slipping away, the PKI leader, Aidit, had organized a plan to seize power by kidnapping and executing a handful of the most influential conservative generals, hoping to decapitate and paralyze the military to some extent. The (theoretically) well-organized PKI would then step into the power vacuum, propagandize, and improvise to some extent, hopefully attracting followers and eliminating potential threats.

[49] "Nixon Offers 12-Month Timetable for Mutual Viet Pullout," *Chicago Tribune*, May 15, 1969.

[50] Joseph Alsop, "Reds' Hue Murder Spree Could Be Prediction," *Los Angeles Times*, May 16, 1969.

[51] Of course, in earlier, more optimistic days, Americans had heard this dire prognosis of what would happen to Southerners in the event of a Communist victory. See, for example, Thomas J. Dodd, "The New Isolationism," speech to Senate delivered on February 23, 1965, printed in *The Vietnam Reader*, edited by Marcus G. Raskin and Bernard B. Fall [New York: Random House, 1967 (revised from 1965 version)], 171, and George A. Carver Jr., "The Faceless Viet Cong," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (Apr., 1966), 354.

more violent the land reform could be depicted as having been, the more bite the "bloodbath theory" would have.

On November 3, 1969, Nixon delivered his now famous "Silent Majority" speech, during which he outlined, among other things, his plan for "Vietnamizing" the war. Once again, the justification for not immediately pulling out of Vietnam featured the land reform, this time in more detail.

> In January I could only conclude that the precipitate withdrawal of American forces from Vietnam would be a disaster not only for South Vietnam but for the United States and for the cause of peace.
>
> For the South Vietnamese, our precipitate withdrawal would inevitably allow the Communists to repeat the massacres which followed their takeover in the North 15 years before. They then murdered more than 50,000 people, and hundreds of thousands more died in slave labor camps. [52]

Not surprisingly, the land reform, being attached so strongly to the entire justification for staying the course in Vietnam, quickly began to attract scholarly attention. Soon after Nixon's "Silent Majority" speech, George Kahin, a professor of political science at Cornell and the head of that university's outstanding Southeast Asia program, decided to weigh in on the "bloodbath theory." Kahin had become an important leader in the anti-war movement, and he well understood how Nixon was putting the history of the mass mobilization to use. In a *New York Times* opinion piece titled "History and the Bloodbath Theory in Vietnam," Kahin wrote:

> Even more damaging to this prospect [of a negotiated peace settlement] is the President's appalling misunderstanding of what actually happened after the 1954 Geneva armistice. He charges that with the departure of the French army from northern Vietnam, the Vietminh "murdered more than 50,000 people, and hundreds of thousands more died in slave labor camps," and that on the basis of this history we must expect a similar bloodbath in the South of the American forces are withdrawn before Thieu's Government can stand on its own.[53]

Determined to eliminate this justification for more U.S. involvement in Vietnam, Kahin argued that Nixon had provided an account of the mass mobilization that was "contrary to the historical record." The proof of Nixon's error? According to Kahin's thinking, the relatively small number of complaints by North Vietnamese people to the International Control Commission entrusted with monitoring the provisions of the Geneva Accords showed that there could not have been significant violence during the land reform.[54]

One talented graduate student of Kahin's, Gareth Porter, had already become interested in the land reform and how it was being used by the Nixon administration as an excuse for not withdrawing U.S. military support for South Vietnam. Where had Nixon's figure of 50,000 killed in the land reform come from? Porter looked back through some of the early writing on

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[52] "Text of President Nixon's Address to the Nation on U.S. Policy in the War in Vietnam," *The New York Times*, Nov. 4, 1969, p. 16.

[53] George Kahin, "History and the Bloodbath Theory in Vietnam," *New York Times*, December 6, 1969, p. 36.

[54] In this theory of the ICC petitions, Kahin echoes an idea put forward more cautiously by two graduate students in an article they wrote for *Christian Century*: Gareth Porter and Ken Ackland, "Vietnam: The Bloodbath Argument," *Christian Century*, November 5, 1969.

Vietnam and traced the figure to an influential book published by the famous Vietnam expert Bernard Fall in 1964 titled *The Two Vietnams*.[55] Even more influential than Fall's book, Porter found, was an account of the land reform (also published in 1964) titled *From Colonialism to Communism*, written by a Vietnamese intellectual named Hoàng Văn Chí. Chí was the Western-educated son of a wealthy landowning family in northern Vietnam's Thanh Hóa province. He had joined the Communist-led Vietminh during the First Indochina War, but then, after witnessing the land reform, abandoned the DRV side and emigrated to the South. Hoàng Văn Chí's account of the campaign was hastily put together with some significant inconsistencies. But generally speaking, his years spent on the DRV side of the conflict, his eyewitness view of the land reform, and his access to Vietnamese culture, made his book compelling, if not entirely reliable. On the violence of the campaign, he wrote, for example:

> So far, nobody has been able to assess accurately the exact number of deaths…during the Land Reform; but according to refugees who reached Saigon in 1957, the whole countryside of North Vietnam was white with the turbans of mourners. (White is the Vietnamese colour of mourning.) This does not seem to be an exaggeration, since, apart from the number of people who were sentenced to death the Special People's Tribunal and publicly shot, there still were people who died in jails and in concentration camps, and those who committed suicide. As many again died in these institutions or by their own hand, but a far greater number of landlords' families—the majority of those being small children—died from starvation owing to the 'isolation policy.'[56]

The Nixon administration, pleased with this grim and richly detailed description of the land reform, began to make Hoàng Văn Chí's account the canonical book of the "bloodbath theory." By July 1972, the President had moved the land reform's toll up to 500,000 killed outright with another 500,000 having perished in alleged slave labor camps. Gareth Porter, as determined to push his case in the opposite direction, argued that the campaign had seen as few as 800 deaths, an estimate that he put forward in an essay titled "The Myth of the Bloodbath."[57] He pointed out Bernard Fall's lack of citations and his lack of Vietnamese language skills. As for Hoàng Văn Chí, he was a more difficult target because of his claim to have been an eyewitness. Among other things, Porter suggested that Chí was working for the CIA, meaning his whole account could basically be dismissed as anticommunist propaganda.

Four years later in 1976, likely emboldened to some extent by the fact that there had been no "bloodbath" at the end of the Vietnam War, a more moderate young scholar named Edwin Moise published an article about the campaign titled "Land Reform and Land Reform Errors in

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[55] Bernard Fall, *The Two Vietnams: A Political and Military Analysis* [New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1964 revised edition], 156. Another influential earlier work of scholarship that dealt with the land reform was: J. Price Gittinger, "Communist Land Policy in North Vietnam," *Far Eastern Survey*, Institute of Public Relations, 1959.

[56] Hoàng Văn Chí, *From Colonialism to Communism* [London: Pall Mall Press, 1964], 166. Two other books, produced six years later, that investigated the use of violence in the South by the Communist side were: Douglas Pike, "The Viet Cong Strategy of Terror," Feb. 1970, 8, and Stephen Hosmer, *Viet Cong Repression and its Implications for the Future* (Lexington: Heath Lexington Books, 1970).

[57] Gareth Porter, "The Myth of the Bloodbath: North Vietnam's Land Reform Reconsidered." International Relations of East Asia Project, Cornell University, Interim Report no. 2, 1972, 1. A more moderate and better researched study of the land reform was produced by Christine Pelzer White, "Land Reform in North Vietnam," (Agency for International Development "Country Paper," 1970). White would go on to produce a dissertation on the DRV land reform, "Agrarian Reform and National Liberation in the Vietnamese Revolution: 1920-1957, Cornell University Ph.D., 1981.

North Vietnam." His article would represent the first expression of what would become a new land reform orthodoxy in Western academia. Moise, who did his graduate work at the University of Michigan, backed off somewhat from Porter's radical revision downward of the land reform's death toll, estimating that perhaps 5,000 people had perished. He argued that there was probably no direct Chinese Communist involvement in the campaign's implementation and perhaps not even in its planning either. With respect to the violence, Moise held that the DRV leaders had been unaware of and therefore not advocates of the widespread killing that had occurred. Following the DRV's official explanation, Moise argued that it was undisciplined land reform cadres who radicalized the campaign on their own initiative against the wishes of the Party leadership. As for Hoàng Văn Chí, Moise basically dismissed him with the same type of arguments used by Gareth Porter. Moise would elaborate on the basic arguments of his 1976 article in his 1982 book, *Land Reform in China and North Vietnam*, which remains today the only historical monograph devoted to the campaign.[58]

What is important to note here is that on every single controversial issue, Moise leaned toward the answer that fit best with the imperatives of the anti-war movement. The pro-war camp saw the land reform as an excessively violent affair (the more violent, the better). Moise depicted the campaign as much less violent, lowering the death toll to a far more palatable "5,000". The pro-war camp tended to see Vietnam as a tool of Communist China. Moise depicted the DRV land reform in such a way that it seemed to prove the DRV's independence from China.[59] The pro-war camp argued that Communism was not popular in Vietnam, that it was something imposed on the North Vietnamese people by a small group of radical ideologues. Moise depicted the land reform as almost too popular among the common people, with cadres and poor peasants going overboard with the policy against the wishes of a moderate and humane Party leadership. The pro-war camp saw people like Hoàng Văn Chí as heroes who had seen the light, who spoke in an authentic Vietnamese voice untarnished by communism, who had recognized that the attainment of freedom lay in a voluntary anti-communist partnership with the United States. To Moise (as with Gareth Porter), Hoàng Văn Chí was an anti-communist propagandist on the wrong side of his nation's history, whose ideas about the land reform merited no intellectual engagement whatsoever.

The field of Vietnam studies has, for the past three decades, remained largely satisfied with Moise's explanation of the land reform, while recognizing that the campaign was probably more violent and costly than he had thought. My sense is that few scholars working on the DRV today believe that fewer than 20,000 people perished in the land reform. But this quiet, unofficial revision of the campaign's human cost has not yet led to any significant rethinking of "errors/deviations" paradigm put forward by the VWP leaders and transmitted by Moise.

Western scholars, instead, have adjusted this paradigm somewhat so that a moderate essence of Vietnamese Communism can be maintained. A commonly accepted theory in the field holds that a radical faction within the top Party leadership, often thought of as being led by the general secretary, Trường Chinh, and perhaps the politburo member Hoàng Quốc Việt, either shoved Nguyễn Tất Thành aside during the period of the land reform or somehow forced him to let them carry out the campaign. Then, toward the end of the land reform, when the damage, unfortunately, had already been done, Thành had somehow managed to wrest control of the Party

[58] Edwin Moise, "Land Reform and Land Reform Errors in North Vietnam," *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 49, no. 1 (Spring, 1976), 70.

[59] Edwin Moise, *Land Reform in China and North Vietnam: Consolidating the Revolution at the Local Level* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 234-236.

away from this radical faction and back into his moderate hands. For example, William Duiker, in his 2000 biography *Ho Chi Minh: A Life*, speaks of "strong countervailing pressures within the Party pushing for the adoption of harsher policies" (presumably against the will of Nguyễn Tất Thành).[60] Later, in describing the decision to carry out land reform, Duiker writes, "The weapon that radicals selected to wage their class war in the countryside was the issue of land reform," with the implication being that Thành's leadership position within the Party was so weak that he could be compelled by alleged "radicals" into taking up a policy position against his will. Duiker speaks of Thành "possibly" having adopted land reform "to placate such militant colleagues as Truong Chinh and Hoang Quoc Viet" in addition to the PRC leadership.[61]

This notion of a politically weak Nguyễn Tất Thành during the period of the land reform also appears in Lien-Hang Nguyen's recent book, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam*. She refers to the VWP politburo during the First Indochina War as "Trường Chinh's politburo," refers to Trường Chinh as the "top Party leader," and refers to the land reform as one of "Trường Chinh's policies." According to Nguyen, Chinh had "assumed control over the land reform" after the war's conclusion.[62]

David Marr, in his recent book, *Vietnam:State, War, and Revolution (1945-1946)*, argues along similar lines. He interprets efforts by Trường Chinh in late October 1946 to prepare Party members for a coming war with France as a sign that the general secretary was in a power struggle with Nguyễn Tất Thành, looking to undermine Thành's allegedly peaceful ways.

> Disseminating such detailed rules of engagement to ICP members without reference to Franco-Vietnamese mixed commission operations, or to the National Guard chain of command, was an audacious power play by Trường Chinh. The [ICP] resolution also ignored the 30 October ceasefire provision in the 14 September modus vivendi. Indeed, according to the resolution, all thoughts that the modus vivendi meant peace had to be erased. "Sooner or later, the French will attack us and we will certainly have to attack them," the resolution foreshadowed. Significantly, Trường Chinh and other organizers of this ICP meeting felt the need to take a position on the vital issue of war or peace one day *before* President Hồ Chí Minh arrived in Haiphong harbor, after more than four months of overseas diplomatic labors.[63]

Was Trường Chinh actually carrying out "audacious power play[s]" to undermine the power of Nguyễn Tất Thành? Was there an edgy rivalry between these two throughout the years of the First Indochina War? Was the land reform "Trường Chinh's policy"? I argue in this dissertation that the answer to these questions is 'no.' Trường Chinh, Phạm Văn Đồng, and Võ Nguyên Giáp, the leadership trio under Thành during the Party's first decade in power, recognized his genius, gave him their total loyalty, and, I believe, probably felt great personal affection for him as well.[64]

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[60] William Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh: A Life* (New York: Hyperion, 2000), 474.
[61] Ibid, 475.
[62] Lien-Hang Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 34-35.
[63] David Marr, *Vietnam: State, War, and Revolution (1945-1946)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 495.
[64] In this aspect I agree with the assessment of Vũ Thu Hiền, whose father Vũ Đình Huỳnh had been Nguyễn Tất Thành's secretary throughout the period of the First Indochina War and beyond. See Vũ Thu Hiền, *Đêm giữa ban ngày* [Darkness at Day] (Virginia: Quê hương, 1997), chapter 12. Hiền writes in his memoir: "My father affirmed that the person who had primary responsibility for creating the errors during the Land reform was Hồ Chí Minh, of course not Trường Chinh, as people have mistakenly thought for many years now. Trường Chinh was the scapegoat

This dissertation has five chapters. The first examines the circumstances in which the decision to carry out land reform was made, concluding with an account of the aforementioned trial of Nguyễn Thị Năm. The second examines the validity of the economic rationale for the land reform, looking at the problem of rice production and famine in the DRV. The third chapter returns to the land reform and looks more closely at how the campaign was structured, considering the implications of its various features. The fourth chapter turns to the Geneva Accords that ended the First Indochina War, examining how the DRV leaders overcame the threat to the land reform posed by the accords. The fifth chapter looks at the final year of the land reform, describing the attempts of the DRV leaders to reinvigorate the campaign in the face of flagging resolve on the part land reform cadres and opposition to the campaign's violence by members of the Central Committee.

The dissertation concludes with a careful analysis of Võ Nguyên Giáp's famous speech about the land reform delivered in late October of 1956. Giáp's speech represents the first expression of the orthodox official view of the land reform that is still carefully maintained by the Party leaders in Vietnam today. Indeed, the errors/deviations paradigm put forward in the Giáp speech and promoted by Moise in his influential study remains, for the field of Vietnam studies, the generally accepted explanation for the land reform's violence. I argue that what happened during the land reform was what the VWP leaders had planned to happen.

[con dê tế thần] for Hồ's mistakes." As this dissertation will show, there are numerous other bits of information that, taken together, point clearly toward this assessment made by Vũ Đình Huỳnh.

Chapter 1

Nguyễn Tất Thành's October 1952 Meeting with Stalin and the Trial of Nguyễn Thị Năm: Going Forward with Land Reform

In late September 1952, the DRV and French Union troops were on the move in Vietnam's northwest region, heading toward their eventual confrontation at Nà Sản in late November and early December. At that time, the DRV leader Nguyễn Tất Thành (more commonly known by the pseudonyms "Hồ Chí Minh" or Nguyễn Ái Quốc)[65] was making his way secretly from the Party headquarters in Thái Nguyên province 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 for October 9-21. 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, attending the congress 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 so that the DRV's forces could achieve a decisive, war-ending victory over the French Union forces. Always attuned to the importance of appearances, Thành requested that he be allowed to attend the congress secretly so as 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" for the DRV leader.[66]

What Nguyễn Tất 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 national independence movement. 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," they would no doubt have taken the opportunity to publicize this as proof that he was under the control of Moscow. Lack of an official greeting in Moscow for their leader "Hồ Chí Minh" might have raised questions among rank-and-file members of the VWP as well, who had already seen the Soviet Union wait over four years before finally recognizing the DRV in January 1950. There was also the fact of

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[65] "Nguyễn Tất Thành" is the real name of the Vietnamese revolutionary who used dozens of pseudonyms throughout his career, the most famous of which were "Nguyễn Ái Quốc" and "Hồ Chí Minh." For the sake of simplicity and to bring to light his effective use of pseudonyms as a consistent and crucial part of his political life, I refer to him throughout this study as "Nguyễn Tất Thành." Many of his writings that are used in this study were written under his pseudonym "C.B." It could be argued that these writings more accurately reflect his political views and methods than those produced by him under his pseudonym "Hồ Chí Minh." Using the name "Nguyễn Tất Thành" enables me to avoid the odd statement that '"C.B." was a pseudonym for Hồ Chí Minh.' It is more accurate and helpful, in my view, to state that "C.B." and "Hồ Chí Minh" were both pseudonyms used by Nguyễn Tất Thành in certain circumstances for certain reasons.

[66] Ilya Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam: Soviet Policy toward the Indochina Conflict, 1954-1963* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 9-10.

the VWP's full-throated promotion of Stalin and the Soviet Union in its press organs, something that would give a one-sided tint to the relationship between the two countries if it became known that Moscow had not bothered to greet the DRV leader's arrival with the proper pomp and circumstance. Nguyễn Tất Thành and other VWP leaders had worked hard to build up the prestige of Thành's character, "Hồ Chí Minh," which by 1952 was the centerpiece of a full-blown personality cult. If Thành arrived in Moscow without official fanfare, he would have to come in secret as "Comrade Din" and not as "Hồ Chí Minh."[67]

According to Gaiduk, Nguyễn Tất Thành was able to meet one time with Stalin, during which the Soviet leader apparently encouraged him to carry out land reform in a manner similar to that carried out by the CCP. This advice was in line with Stalin's general approach to Asian revolutions at the time. It may have been a way of deflecting demands for increased Soviet aid. 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 Union forces that the DRV military received any meaningful boost in weapons during the year following Thành's visit with Stalin. (In late 1953 and early 1954, as they lay siege to the French garrison at Điện Biên Phủ, the DRV would receive crucial heavy artillery and anti-aircraft guns that had not been provided before, which would change the complection of the battle.) Upon leaving Moscow, Thành sent a brief note to Stalin, which was found by Gaiduk in the Russian archives:

> 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.[68]

The idea that Thành made the decision to carry out 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 who is perhaps most famous for having been the "managing editor" (the Communist term for "editor-in-chief") of the VWP's main organ, *The People*, from 1954 to 1982. In an account of his experiences with "Uncle Hồ" written for a talk delivered to Party cadres during his years of retirement, Hoàng Tùng claims that Stalin and Mao Zedong had been pressuring Nguyễn Tất Thành to carry out land reform since 1950.

> After meeting Stalin and Mao [in 1950], the two continued to pressure Uncle to act as they had, which meant to carry out the worker-peasant alliance lead by the Party, establish a worker-peasant government, and then carry out land reform. Uncle did not yet want to carry out land reform [at that time]. The three-stage theory [thuyết ba giai đoạn] that Trường Chinh

[67] My interpretation of Nguyễn Tất Thành's "excessive preoccupation with secrecy" differs somewhat from that of Ilya Gaiduk, who speculates that the DRV leader's primary motive might have been to show sensitivity to Stalin's desire to downplay or keep hidden Soviet involvement in Asian national liberation movements. Thành's first official visit to the Soviet Union would come in the summer of 1955.
[68] Gaiduk, 10-11.

> put forward at the [February 1951] Second Congress reflected the idea of Uncle [là 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."[69]

According to Hoàng Tùng, in the summer of 1952, Mao Zedong and Stalin saw that there had been "no mention of land reform" from the VWP leadership since the February 1951 Second Party Congress. In contradiction to the evidence found by Gaiduk, Hoàng Tùng claims (erroneously, it appears) that Stalin and Mao "called Uncle Hồ to visit" because of his footdragging with respect to the land reform. As we saw above, Nguyễn Tất Thành seems to have taken the initiative to meet with Stalin, not the other way around. 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 may have 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 [Nguyễn Tất Thành] to carry out land reform," as Hoàng Tùng claims. In his account, Tùng mentions that "only after seeing that he [Nguyễn Tất Thành] could no longer refuse them did Uncle decide to carry out land reform." According to Tùng, after making the decision, Thành, using the pen name "Le Dinh" and perhaps writing in Moscow, wrote 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 (i.e. the VWP needed to carry out land reform).[70]

This chapter examines the roughly nine-month period from the autumn of 1952 up through the summer of 1953, looking at how the DRV leaders explained the move to land reform to rank-and-file Party members and to the wider public. We also look at some of the early preparations for the campaign and outline its basic features. The final part of the chapter describes the case of the most famous and controversial landlord of the entire three-and-a-half year campaign, a forty-seven year-old woman named Nguyễn Thị Năm. The owner of a large plantation in Thái Nguyên province, close to the VWP's secret headquarters, she was chosen by the Party leaders to be the model "cruel and despotic landlord" for the campaign. As such, her case was carefully managed by the regime, with considerable time spent publicizing her alleged crimes and describing the process by which she was supposedly defeated by poor peasants in public struggle sessions [cuộc đấu tố]. The controversy that still surrounds Nguyễn Thị Năm's case in Vietnam today stems from her having apparently been a loyal partisan of the DRV cause, with some top Party leaders actually having stayed at her house. Indeed, the Party leaders appear to have fabricated most of the crimes for which Nguyễn Thị Năm was, at some point in early 1953, ulitimately shot. Her case and other aspects related to the way that Party leaders began the

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[69] Hoàng Tùng, "Những kỷ niệm về Bác Hồ" [Memories of Uncle Hồ], downloaded from *Diễn Đàn* [Forum]. http://www.diendan.org/viet-nam/tu-lieu-hoang-tung-1920-2010-noi-ve-ho-chi-minh/.

[70] Ibid. I have not yet been able to track down Nguyễn Tất Thành's alleged article in the Comintern newspaper. A copy of it does not appear in *Hồ Chí Minh Toàn tập* [Hồ Chí Minh's Complete Works]. If Hoàng Tùng, the editor-in-chief of *The People*, had known about the article, others must have too, suggesting that the editors of *Hồ Chí Minh's Complete Works* series may have intentionally left it out of their collection.

land reform suggest that features of the campaign later described by the regime as "deviations" were present from the beginning.

Since taking power in 1945, the Party's policy with respect to the "anti-feudal task" was to move toward it "gradually," step by step, but basically to put off any large-scale expropriation and redistribution of elite land until after the French had been forced out of Vietnam. As this chapter will show, aspects of the historical record seem to support Hoàng Tùng's depiction of Nguyễn Tất Thành and the other VWP leaders as having been 'caught off guard' to some extent by Stalin's recommendation to move immediately to land reform. Key elements of the land reform such as rectification, speak bitterness sessions, use of the term "mass mobilization," the removal of landlords from local political bodies, the intention to increase the estimated yield basis on which the agricultural tax was measured, and, of course, most of all, the tendency to make "landlords" and local cadres the scape-goats for the poor results of Party policies, were all elements that had a life in the Party program before being sown together during the land reform. It was only after Nguyễn Tất Thành's autumn 1952 trip to Beijing and Moscow that the VWP leaders, with help from CCP advisers, brought these and other new elements together to form the land reform policy.

Similarly, the VWP general secretary Trường Chinh's August 15, 1952 corrections to Directive 37 on DRV land policy did contain menacing lines about "tricks" supposedly used by landlords to avoid reducing land rents and outstanding debts owed to them by members of the community. The directive was also devoid of Chinh's normal justifications for a more moderate approach to local elites—the need to preserve the "great unity" in the struggle against the French. Nevertheless, despite these signs of movement toward what would ultimately be a complete break with the "landlord class," Chinh continued to affirm that the Party's policy was "basically the same" as it had been. Indeed, his policy piece seems to be well within the structure of a "gradual" move toward land reform, a steady, step-by-step hardening of the Party's attitude and discourse toward the landlord class that was supposed to be a reflection of the awakening consciousness of the rural poor.[71] As late as October 14, 1952, while Thành was at the 19th Congress in Moscow, Chinh sent out a directive on propaganda to Party leaders in the provinces of regions controlled by the French. His propaganda instructions remained within the existing framework of speaking in primarily nationalist terms of the Vietnamese people versus the "French imperialists and their Vietnamese lackeys". His directive contained no demonization of landlords and provided no hints that a major new land redistribution program was on the near horizon. It appears to have been a continuation of the Party's now seven-year-old policy of redistributing only public land, land confiscated from "Vietnamese traitors", and land "donated" to the DRV state by "patriotic" rural elites.[72]

All this suggests that Nguyễn Tất Thành's return from Moscow and Beijing in November of 1952 marked the true beginning of the Party's move toward land reform. As such, a key aspect of this chapter is the establishment of Thành's role in the land reform in its early stage.[73]

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[71] Thận [Trường Chinh], "Chỉ thị của Ban Chấp hành Trung ương Đảng, Bổ sung chỉ thị 37 về chính sách ruộng đất của Đảng" [Directive from the Central Executive Committee, August 15, 1952: Supplement to Directive 37 on the Party's Land Policy], *VKDTT 1952*, 13: 221-240.

[72] Trường Chinh, "Chỉ thị của Ban Bí thư: Đẩy mạnh công tác tuyên truyền ở vùng sau lưng địch" [Directive from the Central Executive Committee, October 14, 1952: Stepping up Propaganda Work in the Enemy-Controlled Region], *Văn Kiện Đảng Toàn tập*, 13: 320-329.

[73] A common view among Westerners in the field of Vietnamese studies is holds that a "moderate" Hồ Chí Minh and a "radical" Trường Chinh were at odds with each other over policy. See William Duiker, for example, *Hồ Chí Minh: A Life* [New York: Theia, 2000], 437-440. I believe that Trường Chinh was extremely loyal to Nguyễn Tất

Adjusting Reality to Fit the Land Reform

Nguyễn Tất Thành returned to Vietnam at some point in late November after having spent over a month in Moscow. Looking back upon the Party's official organ, *The People*, his December 19, 1952 "Appeal to the Vietnamese People on the Occasion of the Sixth Anniversary of National Resistance Struggle," written under the pseudonym "Hồ Chí Minh," seems to represent a crucial turning point in the Party's public discourse, signaling that the DRV would be going forward with a different policy in the countryside.[74] That was, perhaps, the most obvious signal, and we will look at its content shortly. However, upon closer examination, we are able to discern in the November 27 issue of *The People* a much subtler yet perhaps even more important sign of the change in policy.

General Secretary Trường Chinh Adjusts the Historical Record

That November 27 issue of the Party's main organ printed an advertisement for the recent publication of a new book by the Party general secretary, Trường Chinh, titled *On the Vietnamese Revolution* [Bàn về cách mạng Việt Nam].[75] The book was a publication of Chinh's 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 semi-colonial peoples—the very policy that was now being discarded. (Hoàng Tùng had referred to it as the "three-stage theory," but I believe that what Trường Chinh described in his report still cohered with the classic Leninist framework of the two-stage revolution.)

Before announcing the shift to land reform, Nguyễn Tất Thành and the other Party leaders apparently needed to have some internal theoretical justification for the policy that could be pointed to as having anticipated or formed the basis for the present course. 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 shift to land reform had to be manufactured. It was not possible to change the record completely since Trường Chinh had defended the two-stage revolutionary approach in dozens of published articles, speeches, and other such internal documents. Changing one crucial document, then, would have to suffice for the time being. Below is the original version of Chinh's speech followed by the newer, edited version. One can see clearly why Hoàng Tùng and perhaps others described it as a "three-stage approach." The adjustments are subtle, but significant nonetheless:

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

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

Thành, appreciating his brilliance as a strategist and strongly supporting his moves. I doubt that Trường Chinh saw Nguyễn Tất Thành (as opposed to Thành's constructed character "Hồ Chí Minh") as a moderate.

[74] Hồ Chí Minh [Nguyễn Tất Thành], "Lời kêu gọi của Hồ Chủ tịch nhận dịp kỷ niệm 6 năm toàn quốc kháng chiến" [Chairman Hồ's Appeal on the 6th Anniversary of the All-National Resistance War], *Nhân dân* [The People], no. 87, December 19, 1952.

[75] The advertisement is on the bottom of the third page of *Nhân dân* [The People], no. 84, November 27, 1952.

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 have to, at the same time, overthrow the reactionary feudal forces and, generally speaking, the various levels [các hạng] of imperialist puppets and lackies. On the other hand, in order to abolish the reactionary feudalist forces and the various puppet lackies, we have to overthrow the imperialist aggressors, because the imperialists try to preserve those forces as a means of hanging on to Vietnam. […][76]

[Edited November 1952 version]

As such, the *basic tasks* of the Vietnamese revolution are what? They are to liquidate imperialists 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 have to, 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 feudalist forces, we have to overthrow the imperialist aggressors, because the imperialists depend on those [reactionary feudalist] forces as a means of stealing our country. […][77]

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

The Party general secretary'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 which are counterrevolutionary and hug the legs of the imperialists; the middle landlords, who are undecided and negative; the small landlords, who, because their economic

[76] Trường Chinh, "Hoàn thành giải phóng dân tộc, phát triển dân chủ nhân dân, tiến tới chủ nghĩa xã hội" [Complete the Liberation of Our People, Develop People's Democracy, and Progress toward Socialism], *VKDTT 1951*, 12: 74.
[77] Trường Chinh, *Bàn về Cách mạng Việt Nam: Báo cáo đọc tại Đại hội đại biểu toàn quốc Tháng 2, 1951, Quyển 1* [On the Vietnamese Revolution: Report Read at the All-Nation Representative Congress, February, 1951, Volume 1], (Printed by the VWP Central Executive Committee), 54-55.

> 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 [một số khá đông] of Vietnamese landlords support our people's liberation, support the resistance war or stand neutral but with sympathetic feelings toward the resistance war.[78]

With news from Nguyễn Tất Thành that the Party would be moving forward with land reform in the back of his mind, Trường Chinh's changes to the above section are not difficult to anticipate:

> [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 *partriotic 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 represents/symbolizes [tiêu biểu] feudal remnants. The landlord class exploit the peasant class, that is, the majority of the people, in a severe [nặng nề] way. And they inhibit 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 spear-head 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.[79]

As can be seen, Chinh had decided to remove the final sentence of the original version, which stated that support from "a significant number of landlords" was one of the Party's "strengths." He also added four extra paragraphs, typically vague in character, but, for the most part, appearing to have been written for the purpose of making the earlier document seem to gesture more strongly toward the current decision to embark upon land reform during rather than after the war.

2. A New "Inspection" of the Countryside for the New Land Policy

While going back and changing the official record on the Party's land policy to make it anticipate the sudden move to land reform, the Party leaders also, according to custom, needed to make efforts to frame the new policy shift as a logical response to the actual situation on the ground. At some point in early December, they organized an "inspection" of the countryside in a

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[78] Trường Chinh, "Complete the Liberation of our People" (Original version of speech delivered at 2nd Party Congress in February 1951)," *VKDTT 1951*, 76.
[79] Trường Chinh, "On the Vietnamese Revolution," (second, edited version from 1952), 59.

few areas of Thái Nguyên, Phú Thọ, and Bắc Giang provinces (all belonging to the Vietnamese North interzone). In the archive can be found a "preliminary report" [Bản Sơ kết] and a "Final Report" [Bản Tổng kết] on a ten-day "Meeting on the Inspection of the Countryside in the Vietnamese North Interzone," held from December 15-25, 1952. An examination of these internal documents suggests that this "inspection" ultimately had no significant impact on the Party's formulation of land reform policy. It is better understood as a type of ritual carried out by Party members to provide a quasi-scientific cover for the arbitrary nature of the land reform policy.[80]

The preliminary report from the conference was divided into 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 until today 3) Issues that require discussion so that appropriate requests to the Central Committee can be made. The structure of the report was set up to lead the reader to the conclusions that would form the Party leadership's official justification for the land reform. Thus the first part summarized the Party'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 document's explanation for rural poverty hints at themes of purification and, to borrow Leszek Kolakowki's phrase, "the paradigmatic image of a lost paradise,"[81] that seem especially meaningful in light of the isolation from the outside world subsequently forced upon most of the rural population by the DRV regime for the three decades following the Geneva Accords' period of free travel (May 18, 1955).

> 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 unripened 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.[82]

Expressed in this way, a reduction in peasant consumption of Western (i.e. modern) goods could seem like a step forward, dressing up in modern Marxist-Leninist garb a yearned for return to an imagined past in which peasants lived wholesomely and simply, untarnished by contact with the capitalist world.

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. As we will see, these policies had not been effective in stimulating an increase in productivity in the countryside. How was that

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[80] TTLT3, *UBCCRD*, file 2. "Hội nghị điều tra nông thôn Liên khu Việt Bắc từ 15/12/1952 đến 25/12/1952: Báo cáo sơ kết" [Conference on the Inspection of the Countryside in the Vietnamese North: Preliminary Report]. Document 2: "Bản Tổng kết" [Final Report].

[81] Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism* [New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005 (originally published in 1978)], 33. Kolakowski writes in his section on the Enlightenment that "the theory of man's return to himself is also found as a constituent element of the naturalistic philosophy of the Enlightenment. It appears in fact that the theory in question [i.e. man's return to himself], together with the paradigmatic image of a lost paradise, is an unchanging feature of man's speculation about himself, assuming different forms in different cultures but equally capable of finding expression within a religious or radically anti-religious framework." The writings and policies of Vietnamese Communists, particular those stressing in some way the notion of external contamination of a formerly pure and healthy national body, often remind me of this insight of Kolakowski's.

[82] TTLT 3, *UBCCRD*, File 2, "Preliminary Report."

to be explained? It was essentially the fault of landlord ruses and poor implementation of the policy on the part 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.

Over the past seven years since taking power, the DRV state 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 given to them for free? The rural inspection "preliminary report" explained this as the result of local cadres having carried out the redistribution of land in a "perfunctory manner" [tính cách qua loa], as having "not understood that the ardent desire of the peasants is fairness and appropriateness." It is hard to imagine that peasants would have been sticklers for "fairness" and "appropriateness" to the extent that imperfections in these areas would have been enough to convince them to return free land to the DRV state.

The "preliminary report" also had to explain why the distribution of "public lands" had been so disappointing. Here there were vague hints as to why peasants might have been so 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." But the way this was described made it seem like a local initiative that had nothing to do with actual 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 obtained from the distribution of public lands, 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 [ruộng hoang]:

> 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 reason people have had to leave land unfarmed is French sweeps and the establishment of no-man's land areas. The quantity of this abandoned land is very large and therefore, putting it into use is extremely important. Recent calculations [of fallow land] 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.
>
> There are many types of fallow land. Some of it 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. Especially in enemy-controlled areas, people have the mentality of living day-to-day [sống tạm bợ]. 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 been left fallow [khai

> hoang]. 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.[83]

The second section of the preliminary report was devoted to 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 3) a lack of consciousness [giác ngộ] 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 [thấm nhuần] the policies…," they still had a "supra-class class notion of unity," seeing different classes in the countryside as being like each other, and cadres had "not known how to depend on the forces of the peasant masses when carrying out policies." Secondly, as the report explained, in many localities, local political organizations were occupied disproportionately by members of the exploitative class. And thirdly, with respect to the peasant 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" [Bản Tổng Kết] of the conference. The agenda of this concluding report was as follows:

> Issues that we need to assess:
>
> 1. What issues did we see in the countryside to report back [phản ánh lại] 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.[84]

It appears that the agenda was carefully set at the beginning of the meeting to make sure that there would be no discussion of the merits of the policies themselves. And since the discussion was to be all about "implementation," the Party leaders needed to restrict that discourse so that it did not drift towards the possible conclusion that ease or difficulty of implementation was a reflection of a policy's quality and appropriateness. This seems to explain why so much of the report focused on establishing the weaknesses of the people carrying out the policies.

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[83] Ibid.
[84] TTLT 3, *UBCCRD*, File 2, "Final Report."

The first section of the Concluding Report, dealing with the issues in the countryside to "report back to the Party," stated that cadres, after having "gone deep into the countryside," had seen a number of terrible 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," etc. ways.

> We see clearly that the landlords and the church are forcing the peasants to remain in a state of ignorance, hunger, and poverty through the use of superstition and the exploitation of land rents.
>
> 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 weak political position in the countryside because we have not yet mobilized the masses to solve the legitimate demands of the peasants.
>
> In conclusion, what has been reflected during this conference of 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.[85]

As for the "concrete" ways that the conference had contributed to helping the Party, the final report attempted to suggest that the VWP leadership would base their policy on the picture of the countryside that was "reflected back" to them through the inspection. Thus 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, having come primarily from Stalin, 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 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 commune 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 put forward were the consistent efforts of the participants, the alleged fact that reports of the situation "stemmed from the grassroots level [cơ sở] of communes, districts, and provinces," and the inspection's focus on provinces (Phú Thọ, Bắc Giang, and Thái Nguyên) where land was "concentrated." The last two of the five reasons for success were as follows:

> 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 Bẩm [commune] in order to help representatives discover more problems in localities and, at the same time, to help representatives study more the experience of struggle.

[85] Ibid.

> [The success of the conference] was thanks to the attention of the Central Committee, which helped the conference. [It also succeeded] because it was attended by a [Chinese] Adviser [Cô-vấn], who was present throughout the entirely of the Conference, who participated in the assembly hall, in small groups, and in everyday consultations, leading the Conference to achieve many good results. [86]

It appears, therefore, that at least one CCP adviser had had considerable input on the issue of 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 agricultural. 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 such that it would 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.

Nguyễn Tất Thành Begins the Official Public Discourse on the Land Reform

Nguyễn Tất Thành's aforementioned article, "Chairman Hồ's Appeal On the Occasion of the Resistance War's Sixth Anniversary," published in the December 19th 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 (nông dân). Within the ranks of our National Defense [Vệ Quốc quân], local militias [bộ đội địa phương], and people's guerrillas, over 90% are peasants. Whether it be paying taxes or serving as a people's porter [dân công], 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 interest rates (tức) is a legitimate right of the peasants which has not yet been implemented thoroughly [đến nơi đến chốn]. 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.[87]

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 [tự động], be conscious [tự giác], 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. It would not be good enough to simply enjoy the enforcement of the law; peasants would have to "enthusiastically" support it.

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[86] Ibid.

[87] Hồ Chủ tịch [Nguyễn Tất Thành], "December 19, 1952 Appeal to Vietnamese People," *Nhân dân*, no. 87, December 19, 1952.

They would have to provide visible signs that they had "come to consciousness" in the way that the Party leadership wanted. 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 the Party (or, more accurately, the Politburo).

After Nguyễn Tất Thành's December 19, 1952 appeal, *The People*, throughout the beginning of 1953, began to publish a series of articles written by members of the Politburo that all, 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 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 [Hội đồng Chính phủ] at the end of the year.

In his speech, Đồng somewhat reluctantly recognized that the economy in the DRV-controlled zones was struggling badly, but, in keeping with past practices, he stayed clear of any suggestion that these unsatisfactory results might have been caused in part by flaws in the policies themselves. Imbued as the Party leaders supposedly were with the correct understanding of Marxism-Leninism, an erroneous policy evidently risked generating a crisis of faith. Thus the causes of all failures had to be found in other places: acts of sabotage carried out by internal enemies, landlord intransigence, cadre deviations, or (entirely legitimate) objective factors such as the war or the weather. Yet as the Party leaders would try to generate energy for the destruction of the landlord class, they would increasingly find ways of connecting more and more negative phenomena in rural life (including the poor results of the Party's policies) to alleged landlord treachery.

With their constant encouragement of members of the Party rank and file to engage in self-criticism, the VWP leaders could not completely forego 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 such, the mistakes committed by the Party leadership always had to be somehow related to the transmission of the policy or perhaps to its timing rather than the policy itself. Phạm Văn Đồng, when describing the "weaknesses" [khuyết điểm] of the Party leadership [cấp trên], he wrote:

> 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 [yêu cầu] 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.[88]

[88] Phạm Văn Đồng, "Công tác năm 1952 và nhiệm vụ năm mới" [Work from 1952 and Tasks for the New Year], *Nhân dân* [The People], no. 91, Jan. 15, 1953.

With respect to the Party's apparatus at the local level [cấp dưới], Phạm Văn Đồng expressed disappointment with their performance as well, which he described as suffering from "pretty serious" [khá nghiêm trọng] weaknesses. The organization was "impure" [không trong sạch], meaning, as the prime minister explained:

> A significant number [một số không nhỏ] 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 correctly and implement correctly the policies. They even intentionally carry out the policies incorrectly. With respect to their style of working, they are not only bureaucratic and autocratic [mệnh lệnh] but despotic [cường hào] and militaristic [quân phiệt] as well.[89]

According to Phạm Văn Đồng, 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. Aside from this problem, the prime minister complained in his speech that there was another factor that 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, Đồng 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."[90] 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 Đồng's narrative, this would unleash the productive forces of the peasantry.

The prime minister's speech, re-printed 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, etc., was to be framed in the language of class struggle. The Party's policies were correct. The problem was that local cadres (who came from or had strong relations with the exploitative classes) were 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" was a euphemism for "purge." With respect to the peasants, like Nguyễn Tất Thành, Đồng stressed that the campaign would require them to "awaken" [giác ngộ] and carry out the Party's policy themselves. He also hinted in his speech at the extraordinary bureaucratic scope of the coming campaign:

> Because of the special importance of the *mass mobilization* work, to the necessary extent, the [state's] economic/financial, internal affairs, and cultural sectors will have to coordinate their work with the work of mass mobilization. This coordination, carried out to the right extent, will help increase the effectiveness of mass mobilization work, enabling it to achieve positive

[89] Ibid.
[90] Ibid.

> results. At the same time, this coordination will help these sectors operate strongly and practically.[91]

This statement foreshadowed the enormous demand that the mass mobilization through rent reduction and land reform would place on the entire government apparatus. At its height in the first half of 1956, the campaign would involve about 48,000 cadres of the roughly 80,000 considered to be working in the DRV apparatus. The campaign would drain manpower from every part of the government.[92]

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 about its content. Apparently, by January 22, 1953, the Party general secretary felt that enough time had passed for the rewritten speech to be 'discovered' (i.e. with plausible spontaneity) by a staff writer from *The People* and promoted as showing that he, Trường Chinh, had actually anticipated the early move to land reform back in February 1951. The first paragraph of the article, which was titled "A Sharp Weapon: Reading Comrade Trường Chinh's Book *On the Vietnamese Revolution*," seems to reveal the function of the book with respect to the appearance of the land reform policy:

> During the Congress for the founding of the Vietnamese Workers Party (2-1951), and following the 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 that is closely related to the destiny [vận mệnh] of our party today and in the future. And [the report] is the foundation for the Party's new policy.[93]

The part of Trường Chinh's published (edited) version of the original speech that was quoted at length by Minh Nghĩa was the part that had been quietly rewritten by the general secretary sometime in November, suggesting strongly that the entire episode had been planned from the beginning. Indeed, Minh Nghĩa's depiction of Chinh's rewritten version of the speech 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.[94]

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[91] Ibid.

[92] Nguyễn Duy Trinh, *Báo cáo bổ sung của Chính phủ về cải cách ruộng đất và chỉnh đốn tổ chức* [Supplementary Governmental Report on the Land Reform and Reorganization] (Hà Nội: Sự thật, January, 1957), 4. In this report read at the 6th Meeting of the National Assembly, January 4, 1957, Nguyễn Duy Trinh claimed that 48,818 cadres had participated in the mass mobilization.

[93] Minh Nghĩa, "Một vũ khí sắc bén: Nhân đọc cuốn 'Bàn về cách mạng Việt Nam' của đồng chí Trường Chinh" [A Sharp Weapon: Reading Comrade Trường Chinh's "On the Vietnamese Revolution"], *Nhân Dân* [The People], no. 92, Jan. 23, 1953.

[94] Minh Nghĩa's quote was as follows, with the cut sentences put in brackets. "The anti-imperialist task and the anti-feudal tasks are closely intertwined with each other. [At this time, we need to concentrate our forces in order to carry out the resistance war, so that we can complete our task of *people's liberation*. That is the focal point of our revolution right now.]" The next sentence in the passage was rewritten by Đặng Xuân Khu. The original: "We also need to carry out the democratic task, but *only to an extent that does not hurt but rather helps us to concentrate our forces and complete the task of national liberation*. [Emphasis in original]. The edited version quoted in Minh Nghĩa's article: "The anti-feudal task *must be completed at the same time as the anti-imperial task, but it needs to be*

Apparently to further the legitimacy of this argument about Chinh's speech at the 2nd Congress 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 anti-feudal 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 was its main force," etc. 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 quotes of sentences that Trường Chinh had added to the February 1951 speech in his November 1952 version.

There were two other articles in that January 22, 1953 issue of *The People* that deserve mention mostly as indicators of the ideological climate of the Party at the time. The first is the announcement, taking up much of the newspaper's second page, of the 1951-1952 DRV literary award winners. What was especially remarkable about the announcement was that it listed the ten members of the "Award Selection Committee" along with a list of award recipients, and four people were on both lists. In other words, four members of the Award Selection Committee had taken part in giving their own literary works awards. This situation seems especially egregious in the case of the writer and musician, Nguyễn Đình Thi, who, as the head of the Award Selection Committee, had given himself (or allowed himself to be given) second prize for his novel, *Clash* [Xung kích].[95] (Three years later, some of these same leading Party intellectuals would again serve on the Award Selection Committee and again award themselves prizes, but would, this time, be raked over the coals for it by embittered fellow intellectuals.) This literary episode shows how ideological fervor and *a priori* assumptions about the inherent goodness of the "people's democratic regime" had already expanded the realm of acceptable behavior into areas that were probably unimaginable before the 1945 August Revolution. The land reform campaign would push that realm out further still.

A second article from that January 22, 1953 issue of *The People* was written by the Party theorist Quang Đạm. It dealt with the recently concluded trial in Prague of the Czech Communist Party leader, Rudolph Slansky (along with thirteen other Czechoslovakian Party leaders). This was the last of the Eastern European show trials organized on Stalin's recommendation after his falling out with Josep Tito, the independent-minded leader of Yugoslavia. The VWP leadership had instructed *The People* to publish full-throated support for the attacks on Tito, Kosta, and Rajk, so in this respect, the newspaper's harsh condemnation of Slansky was a continuation of this policy of support. What seems special about this particular article on the European show trials is its proximity to the land reform and the similarity between the language used to describe Slansky's alleged crimes and the language that the VWP leaders would use to describe the alleged crimes of local cadres and landlords who were to be tried during the campaign:

> The Czechoslovakian National Court recently finished trying the case of Slansky and his gang of traitorous accomplices. With two years of irrefutable [rõ mười] evidence, the Slansky gang cannot deny [their crimes] any more. They worked as spies for the American, British, and French imperialists, and they allied with Tito. They used every cowardly and cruel finger to

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done according to a plan, one step at a time, in order to unify for the resistance war as well as bolster revolutionary forces in order to quickly liquidate the imperialist invaders, completing national liberation. [Emphasis in orginal].

[95] "Bản tin về kết quả giải thưởng Hội Văn nghệ Việt Nam 1951-1952" [News on the Results of the 1951-1952 Literature and Arts Association Awards], *Nhân dân* [The People], no. 92, January 22, 1953.

> sabotage the Communist Party and the Czechoslovakian people's democratic regime. The crimes of the culprit Slansky are truly heinous.
>
> […]
>
> In the same way as Tito, Rajk, Kostov, etc…., Slansky is a wicked opportunist element. When he saw the rise of the revolutionary movement and the great strength of the workers and people, he asked to join the Communist party. But he joined the Party *not to follow the path of the Party, but to exploit the Party, to steer the Party in his own direction, to serve his own interests and those of the exploiting class.*
>
> […]
>
> The Communist Party and the Czechoslovakian people against Slansky's gang of traitors achieved a great victory. The Party's forces were strengthened and its progress accelerated. The Czechoslovakian people support with great enthusiasm the conviction and punishment of the Slansky gang. During the period when the Czechoslovakian National Court tried the Slansky gang, there were many factories that raised production levels over 30%.[96]

The second and third paragraphs especially, with their narratives of internal sabotage of the Party explained by the class background of the perpetrators, intentional deviations from Party policy for personal benefit, and the direct connection between Party purging and economic productivity, reflect the basic narratives that would be used against local cadres in the coming land reform campaign.

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

The first official Party meeting held after Nguyễn Tất Thành's return from Moscow and Beijing with the basic plan for the land reform was the 4th Plenum of the Party Executive. The descision to move forward with land reform having already been made, the January 25-30 meeting was the first opportunity for top Party leaders to formalize and present to members of the Central Committee some of their thinking about the basic aspects of the campaign. As was customary, Thành delivered the opening report, setting forth in a somewhat condensed form the major ideas that were 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 key sources of material and spiritual support during the war, is apparent in the opening lines of both Nguyễn Tất 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,

[96] Quang Đạm, "Vụ án Slansky ở Tiệp-Khắc đã kết thúc" [The Slansky Trial has Finished], *Nhân dân* [The People], Jan 22, 1953. Interestingly, the article made no mention of the fact that Slansky had been shot, and it also made no mention of "Zionism" as a key "crime" for which the Czechoslovakian party leader and eleven of the other thirteen other defendants at the trial (who were of Jewish descent) were convincted. Indeed, the official sentence at the trial had convicted Slansky of being part of "Trotskyist-Titoist-Zionist activities in the service of American imperialism."

> 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.[97]

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 the general secretary, 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 [khác nhau một trời mực vực] between socialist and capitalist regimes." On the international front, *Economic Issues of Socialism in the Soviet Union* (along with comrade Malenkov's report) "illuminate for us the world situation today, revealing for 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," Trường Chinh quoted Stalin's book: "If we want to eliminate the unavoidability of war, we need to abolish imperialism." According to the VWP general secretary, Stalin's assessment of the peace movement was "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."[98]

Nguyễn Tất Thành's Opening Report at the 4th Plenum

Nguyễn Tất Thành, in his 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 received [hưởng] 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 [tiêu diệt] more than two million bandits [thổ phỉ]. They have dug canals and built dikes, [transporting] 1,700 million cubic meters of soil.

[97] Hồ Chí Minh [Nguyễn Tất Thành], "Báo cáo tại Hội nghị lần thứ tư của Ban Chấp hành Trung ương Đảng (Khóa II) 25/1/1953: Về tình hình trước mắt và nhiệm vụ cải cách ruộng đất" [Report at the Fourth Plenum of the Party Central Executive Committee (second session), January 25, 1953: On the Situation before us and the Task of Land Reform], *VKDTT 1953*, 14:14.

[98] Trường Chinh [Đặng Xuân Khu], "Báo cáo của tổng bí thư Trường Chinh tại Hội nghị lần thứ tư Ban Chấp hành Trung ương Đảng (Khóa II): Về mục đích, ý nghĩa, phương châm, phương pháp, và kế hoạch thực hiện chính sách cải cách ruộng đất" [Report by the General-Secretary Trường Chinh to the Fourth Plenum of the Party Central Executive (second session): On the Goal, Meaning, Guideline, Method, and Plan for Implementing the Policy of Land Reform.], *VKDTT*, 14:38. [This title was assigned to the report by the editors of the *Văn kiện Đảng* series.]

> 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.[99]

Most of these ideas about the policy of land reform in China were then echoed by Thành in his description of land reform in 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 justication 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, the peasants mobilized, the organization firm, the forces strong enough, political predominance returned to the laboring peasants, and a majority of peasants demand it—we will carry out land reform.[100]

Turning his attention to the land reform itself, Nguyễn Tất Thành, in a similar spirit 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 [vấn đề dân tộc] is the peasant issue because the vast majority of the people are peasants." The peasants were not only the "foundation of the national issue," Nguyễn Tất 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? Nguyễn Tất 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 are still the poorest and most miserable class of people because they either do not have enough land or have no land at all. That is something extremely inappropriate.

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[99] Hồ Chí Minh [Nguyễn Tất Thành], "4th Plenum Report," *Văn kiện Đảng*, 1953, 13:15-16.
[100] Ibid, 23-24.

> 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, Nguyễn Tất 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 [công thương nghiệp]. 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.[101]

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 leadership 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, our countrymen are very enthusiastic to contribute, so why 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 [thành phần xã hội không thuần khiết]. 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.[102]

Trường Chinh's Report at the 4th Plenum: Details on the Implementation of the Land Reform

Trường Chinh's report delivered at the 4th Plenum of the Party Executive did not have a title, which was uncharacteristic of the general secretary's major reports. In such cases, the compilers of the *Complete Party Documents* series sometimes created what they thought was an appropriate title for the report based on its content. The title the editors provided for Chinh's report sums up well its content: "On the Goal, the Meaning, the Guideline, the Method, and the Plan for Implementing the Land Reform Policy."

Once again, signs of anxiety about the timing of the land reform are apparent in the general secretary's subtle manipulation of another document from the Party's Second Congress in February 1951. This time, it was the "Political Program for the Vietnamese Workers' Party." In the original document, the VWP's revolutionary tasks were divided into three clear stages, the first being the anti-imperialist stage, the second being the anti-feudal one, and the third being the socialist stage. During the anti-imperialist stage, the Party would carry out some basic reforms in the countryside to "improve" the lives of the peasants through the reduction of feudalist

[101] Ibid, 25.
[102] Ibid,

exploitation. But it was clear in the Party Platform that a land-to-the-tiller program would be carried out in the second phase, after the French had been driven out of Vietnam: "But during the second stage, the revolutionary spearhead will be pointed at the feudalist forces. At that time, the Party will need to concentrate its forces on the abolition of feudal and semi-feudal remnants and thoroughly implement [a policy of] land to the tiller…" The fact that this stage would also involve "defending the people's independence" indicates that it was to take place after independence had been won from the French.[103]

Yet the way in which Trường Chinh quoted from the Party Platform in his report at the 4th Plenum suggests an attempt to give to the document a meaning that was at odds with its general message. The original section of the Party Platform quoted by the general secretary was as follows: "According to the conditions in every place and at every moment, we will implement our land policy step-by-step, gradually increasing its intensity. In the South, where the land is more concentrated than in the Center and the North, the Party's land policy will have to be implemented more strongly than in the Center and North."[104] Chinh's quote of this passage left out the middle sentence about land policy being "implemented more strongly" in the South. "According to the conditions in every place and at every moment, implement our land policy step-by-step, gradually increasing its intensity… Prepare to advance toward the gradual implementation of land to the tiller."[105]

The actual content of these (very minor) changes to and slight misrepresentations of the past record is not as important, in my opinion, as what they reflect about the psychology of the top Party leaders. They may have been nervous that lower-ranking members would 'put two and two together' and conclude that the decision to carry out land reform had something to do with Hồ Chí Minh's secret visit to Beijing and Moscow, raising questions about the nature of the relationship between the DRV and its two key allies. But I suspect that, even if the VWP leaders had decided entirely on their own to make the sudden move to land reform, they still would have felt the need to show continuity between that move and earlier policy statements. What Nguyễn Tất Thành, Trường Chinh, and the other top Party leaders expected and, indeed, demanded of Party members and, to some extent, the entire body of people under their rule, was a quasi-religious faith in their leadership and 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 act in contradiction to earlier predictive statements.

Trường Chinh Describes the Basic Contours of the Land Reform

Over the next three years, Nguyễn Tất Thành, Trường Chinh, Phạm Văn Đồng, and other top Party leaders would produce together hundreds of pages of explanations, clarifications, exhortations, etc., all dealing with aspects of the land reform. Their writings on the campaign would come in a number of different forms: internal Party directives, newspaper articles, resolutions, circulars, speeches given at various Party meetings, reports, etc. In addition to these writings produced by the top Party leaders, 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 leadership organized simple land reform

[103] Trường Chinh, "4th Plenum Report," *VKDTT*, 1953, 13:435.
[104] "Chính cương của Đảng Lao động Việt Nam" [Platform of the Vietnamese Workers' Party], *Nhân dân* [The People], no. 1, March 11, 1953.
[105] Trường Chinh, "4th Plenum Report," *VKDTT 1953*, 14:54.

newspapers that were to be produced mostly, as it seems, by somewhat lower-level DRV journalists who were 'embedded' within land reform "brigades" (that is, groups of several hundred land reform cadres working in one region under the control of one leader). Within and even across these three categories, there was a tremendous amount of repetition, with the same themes of landlord treachery, local Party decay due to impure class composition, and poor-peasant exultation at the overthrow of the landlord class, coming up over and over again.

This next section looks at the first of these three categories, the writings on the land reform produced by the top Party leaders, focusing on their earliest descriptions of how the campaign was to unfold. As efficiently as possible, I will move through the "guidelines, methods, and plans" for the campaign, noting, with the benefit of hindsight, those structural elements of the land reform that seem to shed light on the origins of its violence. Trường Chinh's report at the 4th Plenum of the Party Executive provides one of the earliest discussions of how the campaign was to be structured and implemented.

The Two Phases of the Mass Mobilization

First of all, the land reform as it was initially conceived (in line with the CCP model) would have three phases. The first phase would be called "mass mobilization for rent reduction" [phát động quần chúng giảm tô], the second would be called "mass mobilization for land reform," and the third would be called reinspection [phúc tra]. The "rent reduction" phase, which was to be the focus of 1953, was supposed to prepare the way for the "land reform" phase, during which the slogan "land to the tiller" would be "thoroughly implemented." As opposed to what had been suggested in the first, February 1951 version of the Party Platform, mass mobilization would be carried out not in the part of the country where agricultural land was most concentrated—the South—but in the northern half of the country (from Zone 4 upward). And it would be implemented only in those "free" areas that were under "firm" [vững chắc] DRV control.[106] 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 provincial-level brigades to carry out mass mobilization in a few "representative" or "typical" [điển hình] communes. Lessons from that initial experience would then be drawn and serve as the basis for the prompt expansion of the campaign (again, in the 'spreading oil stain' manner) to surrounding communes.

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 these desires].
2. Cadres need to patiently educate the masses, make the majority of them awaken and struggle on their own volition. Cadres must absolutely not take an authoritarian approach, should not act in place of the masses, and should not act as though doing favors for them [ban ơn].
3. Cadres need to find loyal and zealous elements of the masses to act as backbones/mainstays to help the Party lead the movement.

[106] Ibid, 69-70.

4. Both peasant men and women will be mobilized, and cadres should rigorously [mạnh mẽ] reorganize the local Peasant National Salvation Association so that it can serve as the core [nòng cốt] of the movement.[107]

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 with landlords, and overthrow reactionary Vietnamese traitors." In terms of the specific strategy to be used in the struggle with the landlords, the general secretary described it as follows: "hit and pull them, while pulling them hit them, while hitting them pull them, hit them first, pull them after."[108]

Preparatory Tasks for the Mass Mobilization

For the mass mobilization during 1953 to attain "good results," Trường Chinh stressed four preparatory tasks: 1) *Inspection* 2) *Policy preparation* 3) *Ideological preparation* 4) *Organizational preparation*. The first task, "inspection," involved "investigating the situation with respect to the implementation of the Party and Government's land policies along with the strength of the enemy, of French puppets, of the feudalists, and of reactionaries…" In other words, despite the fact that the mass mobilization for rent reduction was to be carried out in areas that were supposedly under firm DRV control, in some cases for years, it was to be assumed by cadres carrying out the inspection that the "enemy" existed in each and every community. Cadres were also to inspect the situation in the four major political organizations of each commune: the local Party cell, the Peasant National Salvation Association, the local government, and the United Vietnam front organization. Inspection of these four organizations was to focus on "determining clearly the class backgrounds [thành phần] of those organizations' [members] as well the thinking and conduct of commune-level cadres…"[109]

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." When carrying out policies that had an especially radical communist character to them—and no policy that the DRV had implemented up to that point was close in radical character to what was being embarked upon now—the Party leaders still felt more comfortable having such policies appear to originate from an "old democratic" [dân chủ cũ] institution like the National Assembly. Trường Chinh explained that, in addition to and separate from the public 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 [kỷ luật] for cadres in their implementation of the land policy." It appears that "cadres" here refers to local cadres rather than the outside cadres who would be sent into communities to carry out mass mobilization.

The third item, "ideological preparation" [chuẩn bị tư tưởng], referred to the efforts by Party to "propagandize, explain, and publicize widely the land policy" with the goal being to "win over the thinking of cadres, Party members, and the people." Perhaps with the thousands of future land reform cadres in mind, upon whom the Party leaders would need to rely for carrying out the mass mobilization, Trường Chinh stressed the need to overcome ways of thinking that

[107] Ibid, 71.
[108] Ibid.
[109] Ibid, 72.

were likely to hinder the movement: "fear of harming [national] unity, fear of landlord resistance, or contempt for the [power] of the landlord class, or a pessimistic assessment of the basic situation resulting in [a cadre's] not daring to mobilize the masses, etc." Indeed, it appears that the Party leaders were realistic from the very beginning of the campaign about the challenge that compelling thousands of cadres to implement the policy would pose.

And 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 can help localities mobilize the masses and help the Central Committee lead the mass movement."[110]

The Method for Inspiring Attacks on Landlords

As noted earlier, the Party leadership had already begun to use "speak bitterness" [tố khổ] sessions as a means of aiding the consolidation of DRV power in areas that had recently been won-over from the French. In those circumstances, Party 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 the control of the enemy. This policy of organizing "speak bitterness" sessions was a fundamental part of what land reform cadres would be expected to do after arriving 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 so as 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 [đấu lý] (base oneself on reality and crush the mealy-mouthed arguments of the landlords); struggle through force [đấu lực] (use the power of the masses to force the landlord into submission), struggle through law [đấy pháp] (use the law of the state to deal with cruel and stubborn [landlords].

Despite the menacing tone of his description, Chinh still insisted that "during the struggle, [cadres and peasants?] absolutely may not use torture, may not strike out rashly, and may not kill indiscriminantly."[111]

Mass Mobilization as Professional 'Hoop' for Petit Bourgeois Cadres

In the autumn of 1951, the Party leadership had begun to implement "rectification" [chỉnh huấn] in the military, with the focus apparently being on the commissars. At the beginning of 1952, the Party leadership had made plans to expand "rectification" down through the rest of the Party apparatus. After the decision to move forward with land reform, the Party leaders adjusted their rectification program, turning it into a preparatory course for cadres recruited to carry out the campaign. The "main demand" of rectification, Trường Chinh

[110] Ibid, 72.
[111] Ibid, 73.

explained, was to overcome "landlord and rich peasant thinking". The move to land reform meant that rectification classes would now be required to study the Party's "Draft Political Program on Land" [Dự thảo cương lĩnh ruộng đất] and the Directive on Mass Mobilization [Chỉ thị phát động quần chúng]. The close relationship between rectification and land reform was made clear by Trường Chinh in this early description of the policy:

> When we have finished putting cadres through rectification, we will combine it with mass mobilization to cultivate [bồi dưỡng] and consolidate their ideology; we will cultivate and promote the good cadres, and we will send away [điều động], punish, or purge the bad cadres. With respect to cultivating and promoting cadres, we will especially focus on those from worker-peasant backgrounds.[112]

Thus from it inception, the land reform was to be closely tied to the professional prospects of those who served the campaign as cadres, with a good performance potentially opening new career opportunities and a poor performance leading to some sort of punishment. Trường Chinh stressed that, for mass mobilization cadres, carrying out the policy would be a "challenge"—an opportunity for them to learn about and develop a correct "political standpoint."

Mass Mobilization to be Coupled with "Reorganization of Local Party Cells"

In addition to serving as a professional yardstick for the thousands of men and women recruited to serve as land reform cadres, the campaign was also to be connected with the "reorganization" of local Party cells [chỉnh đốn chi bộ]. As noted earlier, this term was a euphemism for a Party purge, which would be carried out parallel to and in a mutually reinforcing way with the campaign's attack on the landlord class.

> The reorganization of Party cells must be tightly coordinated with the mass mobilization, with the work of mobilizing the masses used as a means of consolidating Party cells. Before mobilizing the masses [in a particularly locality], [cadres?] must investigate the situation with the local cell. Landless, poor, and middle peasant party members who are zealous should be organized into separate groups and pulled away from those bad Party members who sabotage our policies. During the process of mass mobilization, [land reform] cadres were to promote and cultivate zealous elements while at the same time paying close attention to, inspecting, and promptly dealing with those elements who resist the policy.[113]

When the mass mobilization was completed, explained Trường Chinh, the Party cell would be reconstituted with an eye toward inducting new members from landless, poor, or middle peasant backgrounds. And, in a move that would impact the lives of northern Vietnamese villages for years to come, it was those peasants who had "worked zealously, struggled resolutely, connected closely with the masses, and who behaved properly [tác phong đúng đắn]" during the mass mobilization who were to be honored with entry into the Party. In other words, they would be christened the new leaders of the community. A serious challenge for land reform cadres would be convincing local members of a community that they should respect and admire their new

[112] Ibid, 80.
[113] Ibid, 81.

leaders—that is, neighbors who had earned political promotion through "zealous" and "resolute" denunciations of local elites.

The Basic Features of the Land Reform in Summary

Thus Nguyễn Tất Thành, Trường Chinh, and to a lesser extent the other report deliverers at the January 1953 4th Plenum of the Party Executive laid out, for the first time, some of the fundamental features of the mass mobilization. It was to have two major phases,[114] a rent reduction phase and then a land reform phase. Chinh's report discussed some of the characteristics of the rent reduction phases, frequently referred to simply as "mass mobilization," but did not provide many specifics about the later land reform phase. It appears from the general secretary's report that the "struggle" aspect of the campaign would take place in the form of "speak bitterness" sessions organized by the land reform cadre. It was during these sessions that members of the community would be prompted to denounce the purported crimes of members of the community identified as "landlords" or "traitors." For the cadres who carried out the mass mobilization, it was to be a professional test of sorts that could determine what doors would be opened to them in their revolutionary careers. A key part of the mass mobilization would be the "reorganization" of local Party cells, which meant purging them of "bad elements" and replacing them with "zealous elements," ideally from the ranks of the "landless, poor, or middle peasants." A "Draft on Land Policy" and a "Directive on Mass Mobilization" would be produced in the coming time. These two documents would have more details about the mass mobilization and be crucial study material for cadres recruited to carry out the mobilization.

On February 5, 1953, five days after the conclusion of the 4th Plenum of the Party Executive, Trường Chinh sent a directive to members of the Central Committee that dealt with the issue of how the resolution produced at the end of the recent plenum should be handled. Along with various other tasks mentioned in the resolution, the "central task of this year" (mass mobilization for complete rent reduction and the implementation of debt reduction) were to be publicized throughout the entire Party. Information about the coming land-reform phase of the mass mobilization, however, could only be disseminated to Party leaders at the zone level and at the division level in the military. But Central Committee members were not to tell even these high-ranking cadres anything about the timing of the land reform phase. With respect to provincial and battalion level Party members, they were to be told about the new conception of the "people's revolution" as being essentially a "peasant revolution" and the need to progress toward land reform, but were also to be told "nothing clear" about when land reform would be implemented. As for all Party members below the provincial level or, in the military, below the battalion level, they were not to be told about the land reform.[115]

Three Speeches by Nguyễn Tất Thành

Within the span of a week from January 29 to February 6, Nguyễn Tất Thành delivered three different speeches that have been published in his collected works and are worth looking at

[114] The third phase, "Reinspection," was apparently not discussed by the Party leaders at this time. Nevertheless, I feel strongly that it would have been in the plans from the beginning in keeping with the CCP practice.
[115] Trường Chinh [Đặng Xuân Khu], "Chỉ thị của Ban Bí thư, 5/2/1953: Về việc phổ biến Nghị quyết Hội nghị Trung ương lần thứ tư" [Directive of the Secretariat on the Dissemination of the Resolution from the 4th Plenum of the Central Committee], *VKDTT 1953*, 14:137.

briefly for what they reflect about the internal culture of the VWP at the time of the land reform. The first speech was delivered by Thành at the "Meeting to Sum-up the Northwest Military Campaign." The second speech (February 5) was delivered at the "All-Nation Peasant and People's Mobilization Meeting." The third speech was delivered by the DRV leader at the opening session of a rectification class for cadres connected with Central Committee offices. In all three cases, the audience would have been comprised mostly of 'white collar'cadres who had some level of formal education that allowed them to work with documents. Attendees at the speech summing up the recent Northwest Military Campaign were probably mostly army commissars, the political officers in the military who worked alongside the normal military brass.

Speech 1: Summing-up Meeting for the Northwestern Campaign (January 29, 1953)

The Northwestern Military Campaign, carried out in the last quarter of 1952, had achieved mixed results for the DRV troops. In the first part of the campaign, they had successfully taken the strategically important French Union garrison at Nghĩa Lộ and much of the surrounding territory. The French General Salan had then pulled the majority of his troops in the region back to a small base at Nà Sản with the intention of turning it into an "entrenched camp." Needing a few weeks to transform Nà Sản into a heavily armed fortress that could defend itself against attacks from multiple divisions, and with DRV forces only three days' march away, Salan had organized some complicated diversionary campaigns in the region. In their actual confrontations with the enemy, these diversionary campaigns had achieved mixed results, but thanks in large part to a fortuitous discovery of a key DRV supply line, the French Union forces had been able to achieve the needed delay. In early December, DRV forces attacked Nà Sản, which was at that point was defended by 12,000 French Union troops. After about a week of heavy fighting resulting in significant casualties for both sides, but certainly worse for the DRV side, Võ Nguyên Giáp pulled his troops back from Nà Sản. At the summing-up meeting, Nguyễn Tất Thành would have been addressing officers and commissars who had been involved in these recent battles:

> The Party Central Committee, the Government, and Uncle are not completely satisfied with you [các chú] this time, but we are more satisfied than in all earlier times.
>
> Your strong points are as follows:
>
> 1. Both cadres and soldiers have improved.
> 2. You have absorbed [thấm nhuần] the determination of the Party Central Committee and passed that determination to your soldiers so that they make the effort to destroy the enemy's forces. All of you have happily endured hardships and overcome difficulties.
>
>   For example: lacking food, you, on your own volition, went out and seized food to drive back the enemy.[116]

What I think is remarkable about the above passage is the hierarchical, top-down conception of the military as an instrument of the Party's will rather than the people's will that it appears to reflect. The notion of seemingly empty DRV soldiers needing to be infused with the

[116] Ibid, 138.

"determination" of the Party Central Committee in order to carry out attacks conveys a different picture of that fighting force than we usually see in official depictions. Another crucial theme in the speech was obedience toward and faith in the Party leadership:

> Shifting from the border to the delta, some of you became weak-kneed [hoang mang], but when the Party Central Committee said to attack, you all were able to attack in the delta. Having grown accustomed to attacking in the delta, you were not excited about returning to the mountains again. When you attacked Hòa Bình, the Central Committee stated: the enemy has stretched his neck out for us to break. When you returned to the Northwest, the Central Committee said: if you are determined, you will be able to attack. Subsequently, all of you had the determination and attacked successfully, with the result being that soldiers believed in cadres. The entire army believes in the Central Committee and Government, and because of that we have scored big victories. As such, the Central Committee is correct. The Central Committee says to attack and all of you attack with determination, meaning that victory is certain.[117]

At the end of the speech, Nguyễn Tất Thành moved away from discussion in terms of the Central Committee and put his "Hồ Chí Minh" persona to use as a source of motivation for cadres and soldiers.

> This time, the 308 [Division] shall receive Uncle's award. The 308 must always hold on to that honor, determinedly carrying out emulation to kill the enemy and make contributions. But you may not become arrogant or self-satisfied. The other units also need to try hard. Uncle still has many more awards.
>
> This time Uncle will give each Division 25 medals to bring back as rewards for those who made contributions. And report back to Uncle on who receives the awards.[118]

Speech 2: 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. As the title of the organization indicates, it was focused primarily on propaganda and agitation with an eye toward influencing various sectors of the national community in ways that would be beneficial to the Party's goals. People's Mobilization had been divided into various sectors such as peasant mobilization, women's mobilization, youth mobilization, enemy mobilization, etc., with propaganda carefully tailored to the targeted audience. Arguably the most important of these sectors was the peasantry, who, as the Party leadership increasingly stressed, comprised the largest segment of the national population. The move to mass mobilization had enormous implications for those involved in "peasant mobilization." Indeed, it appears that the "peasant mobilization" organization would end up being transformed during the mass mobilization into the Party's Land Reform Committee (Ủy ban cải cách ruộng đất). Thus Nguyễn Tất Thành, in his February 5, 1953 speech to "peasant mobilization" cadres, discussed the coming land reform at length.

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[117] Hồ Chí Minh [Nguyễn Tất Thành], "Bài nói tại Hội nghị tổng kết chiến dịch Tây-Bắc, 29/1/1953 [Talk Delivered at the Summing-up Conference of the Northwest Military Campaign], *VKDTT 1953*, 14:139.
[118] Ibid, 140.

> 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. As such, if we want to be victorious in the resistance war, we not only need to overthrow the imperialists but the feudal landlords as well.[119]

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 to liberate the peasants and to give them land. The content of the *national revolution* is also to liberate the 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 theoretical statements made by the Party leadership over the past seven years, seems to have continued to be a source of anxiety. Like Trường Chinh with his reworking of old policy statements into new directions, Nguyễn Tất Thành again felt the need to defend the Party's past policies. The demonization of the landlords today inevitably raised questions about yesterday's alliance with them. Had the earlier policy between incorrect? As Nguyễn Tất Thành 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 DRV leader affirmed, but 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?
>
> *Because cadres* do not understand the policies and do not have a firm political standpoint. They want to win the hearts of both the peasants and the landlords, and sometimes of the landlords more. Because cadres are out for themselves [tự tư tự lợi]. Although they are in the Party, their feudal landlord tails stuck out. They have not yet scrubbed themselves clean of their feudal landlord thinking. They would get the peasants to lead the charge but not join the charge themselves. [Local cadres] were even corrupt and wasteful. Cadres from the zone down through the province, district, and commune levels more or less all 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.[120]

Lest his audience at the "people's mobilization" meeting lose heart—most of them probably came from elite families—Nguyễn Tất Thành offered some words of encouragement.

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[119] Hồ Chí Minh [Nguyễn Tất Thành], "Bài nói tại Hội nghị Nông vận và Dân vận Toàn quốc" [Talk Delivered at the Conference for the All-Nation Peasants' Mobilization and People's Mobilization Organizations, February 5, 1953], *VKDTT 1953*, 14:141.
[120] Ibid, 142.

There were "a few" [đôi] 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 extremely fiercely 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.[121]

Then Nguyễn Tất Thành turned his attention to the issue of what serving as a land reform cadre would entail (this was a task that probably lay in the future for most of his audience). The fact that rent reduction still had not been carried out "thoroughly" four years after the promulgation of the Rent Reduction Decree in 1949 showed that the problem was "not simple" and that it was a part of "class warfare, with the peasant class struggling against the landlord class." The mass mobilization was itself a "military campaign" of sorts, Thành stated, but larger than the Hòa Bình or Northwest campaigns because it would be "carried out throughout the entire country." And "like all other military campaigns," the DRV leader 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? 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" actually 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 landlord stops at no evil scheme, and dealing with him is no easy task. [The landlords] have thousands of years of experience in their reign, they have many wicked tricks. If we underestimate the enemy, we will fail.[122]

[121] Ibid, 142.
[122] Ibid, 144.

Thus, according 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 "Machiavellian" scheme to sabotage the mass mobilization. To take that polite behavior at face value, it appears, was to be "subjective."

Before ending his speech to these mass mobilization cadres, Nguyễn Tất Thành gave them one last piece of instruction, which was also pregnant with meaning.

> 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" [mình thay mặt nông dân] 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.[123]

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

Speech 3: Opening Ceremony of Rectification Class for Central Committee Offices

While Nguyễn Tất Thành's second speech (above) was geared toward cadres preparing to carry out mass mobilization, his third speech was targeted at "intellectuals" who had been recruited to work as aides in Central Committee offices and who were just beginning their "rectification" course. As we saw earlier, the overall goal of rectification was to cleanse Party members of petit-bourgeois or, as was being stressed more and more frequently, "landlord thinking". The basic method involved dividing students up into small groups in which individuals would have to carry out criticism and self-criticism. The leaders of the rectification 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.

Nguyễn Tất 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 rectify? 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 [tếu].
>
> Those party members are not yet sound in character [đúng đắn], so they must be reformed.[124]

[123] Ibid, 147.

[124] Hồ Chí Minh [Nguyễn Tất Thành], "Bài nói trong buổi khai mạc lớp chỉnh huấn cán bộ Đảng, Dân, Chính ở cơ quan Trung ương" [Talk Given during the Opening Session of the Rectification Class for Cadres of the Party, Mass Organizations, and Government in the Offices of the Central Committee, February 6, 1953], *VKDTT 1953*, 14:148-149.

Thành then addressed the notion, apparently common among intellectuals at the time, 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 "rectification."

> 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 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 compradore bourgeoisie as well.[125]

Perhaps as a means of motivating his audience of intellectuals, which was comprised of both Party members and non-Party members, Nguyễn Tất Thành spoke of major changes to the Party that were on the near horizon. Part of that change would involve inviting people outside of its 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 [lật ra] 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.[126]

Indeed, it had already begun to happen on an experimental level. In keeping with Soviet practices, the DRV leaders, when embarking upon a new policy, tended to carry out a few initial

[125] Ibid, 157.
[126] Ibid, 159.

tests that were set up to serve as "model examples" [điển hình] for subsequent practitioners of that policy to use as a guide and source of inspiration. The first and only truly high-profile mass mobilization target was a 47-year-old woman named Nguyễn Thị Năm. Her case is the focus of the next section.

The Land Reform's Most Famous Landlord: Nguyễn Thị Năm

Nguyễn Thị Năm is one of the most controversial characters in modern Vietnamese history, known primarily for being the first person shot as a "cruel and despotic landlord" during the land reform. Much about her background remains unknown in the West as well as in Vietnam, though some of the unofficial details about her life that had been circulating quietly among Vietnamese intellectuals for decades seem to have been confirmed in a recently published article written by one of the Vietnamese government's leading historians, Dương Trung Quốc.[127] Surviving members of Nguyễn Thị Năm's family had contacted Quốc in 1992 to ask that he help clear her name of the charges leveled against her during the land reform in early 1953. According to Quốc's article, family members had in years past petitioned the Vietnamese government to have Nguyễn Thị Năm's name officially cleared. Those efforts bore some fruit in 1987 during the hey-day of "New Change" [Đổi mới], Vietnam's "glasnost", when the Central Committee's Orgburo instructed the Party leadership of Thái Nguyên province (where Nguyễn Thị Năm was tried and shot) to release an announcement changing her class status from "cruel and despotic landlord" to "resistance war capitalist landlord" (i.e. from enemy to friend). But obviously the Party leaders had decided that this half-gesture was all they could safely do to provide some measure of closure to her surviving family members. Why the Party leaders felt this way in 1987 (and continue to do so today) will become apparent presently. Unsatisfied with this gesture and determined to have the public record corrected, Thị Năm's family members had then turned to the historian Dương Trung Quốc. His discussions with them in 1992 provided the basis for his recent article in the newspaper *Labor*.

Nguyễn Thị Năm grew up in Hải Phòng, where she became involved in trade as a young woman. Smart and beautiful with a talent for business, she quickly amassed a large fortune and founded her own trading company named "Cát-Hanh-Long." What role her husband played in this process I have not been able to determine from available sources, but he seems to have died at some point before the August Revolution. Nguyễn Thị Năm's business dealings focused on trade in metals, but in 1942, she dipped into her ample fortune to buy the largest plantation in northern Vietnam. Located in the middle of Thái Nguyên province, about 50 kilometers due north of Hà Nội, her estate was apparently a favored source of hospitality and protection for top Party leaders during the dangerous years of the Second World War.

According to Dương Trung Quốc, Nguyễn Thị Năm became aquainted with the Party leadership through an early friendship in Hải Phòng with the revolutionary writer Nguyễn Đình Thi. Highly patriotic, she became a supporter of the Party, with her two sons joining the revolutionary movement and becoming officers in the DRV army. Dương Trung Quốc only mentions Võ Nguyên Giáp and Nguyễn Chí Thanh as having enjoyed the hospitality of her plantation in Thái Nguyên province. But other sources suggest that her guestlist was much

[127] Dương Trung Quốc, "Viết nhân Ngày Thương binh Liệt sĩ" [Writing on the Occasion of Memorial Day], *Lao động* [Labor], no. 28, July 22, 2012. The newspaper article may be accessed online at http://laodong.com.vn/Lao-dong-cuoi-tuan/Viet-nhan-Ngay-Thuong-binh-Liet-si/75128.bld

broader. The aforementioned managing editor of *The People*, Hoàng Tùng, for example, writes that "Trường Chinh, Hoàng Quốc Việt, and Lê Đức Thọ frequently had meals at her house."[128]

In addition to offering Party members the use of her house in Thái Nguyên province and supporting her two sons' involvement in the Party's revolutionary activities, Nguyễn Thị Năm provided the "Hồ Chí Minh Government" with crucial financial support in the early days after the Party's seizure of power in August of 1945, when the regime's fate hung in the balance. Looking back at the revolutionary newspaper *Democracy* [Dân chủ], which was run by Party members in Hải Phòng, we see a front-page article about Nguyễn Thị Năm in the September 29, 1945 issue. The title of the article reads: "The Gold Record has been Broken! Ms Cat-Hanh-Long Donates 110 *lạng* of Gold."[129] This was a reference to the Party's "gold week" campaign carried out from September 16 to 23 (primarily in Hà Nội and Hải Phòng, it appears) to encourage donations to the regime.

Another interesting piece of evidence about Nguyễn Thị Năm's background is an article on her plantation written by Vũ Đình Hòe in the September 1944 issue of the left-oriented Hà Nội cultural journal *Forum* [Thanh nghị]. Hòe spent a day investigating the plantation for his article, interviewing its manager extensively and questioning some of the estate's tenant farmers as well. Nguyễn Thị Năm's manager informed Hòe that he had been given "full power of decision" at the estate. It did not appear that Thị Năm or anyone in her family had spent much time at the property in the years after purchasing it. In his investigation of the situation of the tenant famers, Hòe saw them as poor and struggling, but largely as a result of the overall deteriorated condition of the estate and of Vietnam's economic struggles more generally. Their rent was thirty percent of their harvest—comparable to the maximum land rent rate mentioned by Trường Chinh in his Party directive on land rents in 1952.[130] Certainly Nguyễn Thị Năm's plantation would not have been mistaken for a *kibbutz* or an agricultural version of Robert Owen's New Lanark. No doubt the job of her plantation manager was to make a profit rather than to make tenants happy. Nevertheless, the general image of life for the tenant farmers of Thị Năm's plantantion that emerges from Vũ Đình Hòe's description in *Forum* is a far cry from the image of it painted on the pages of *The People* in the first half of 1953.

The Nguyễn Thị Năm Propaganda Campaign

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 that was only about 30 kilometers to the west of Nguyễn Thị Năm's plantation. How it happened that the Party leaders chose Nguyễn Thị Năm to be the model "cruel and despotic landlord," whose trial would kick off the land

[128] Hoàng Tùng, "Memories of Uncle Hồ," 11. It is possible that Dương Trung Quốc thought it advisable not to stress the idea that top Party members directly involved with organizing the land reform had enjoyed Nguyễn Thị Năm's personality (such as Hoàng Quốc Việt, Phạm Văn Đồng, and Lê Văn Lương).

[129] "Ky-luc vang da bi pha! Bà Cat-Hanh-Long cung 110 lang vàng" [The Gold Record has been Broken! Ms. Cat-Hanh-Long Donates 110 *lạng* of Gold], *Dân chủ* [Democracy], no. 31, September 29, 1945. The article printed a letter from Nguyễn Thị Năm to the Gold Week Organization in Hải Phòng: "I have recently returned from afar and was welcomed home by the organization board of Gold Week. It is with pleasure that I donate to the independence fund 110 *lạng* of gold. Because I do not have gold on hand at the moment as a result of the slowdown in trade, and because I will not be able to collect that quantity in a timely fashion, I ask the organizing board to allow me to make my contribution in rice, iron, and steel according to market price. This means all the goods that the government needs to use. – Cát-Hanh-Long"

[130] V.H., "Điều tra nhỏ: một đôn điền lớn ở Thái Nguyên" [A Small Inspection: A Large Plantation in Thái Nguyên], *Thanh nghị* [Forum], no. 83, September 16, 1944.

reform, remains unclear. A later account by Hoàng Tùng, who, as the managing editor of *The People*, apparently sat in on the Politburo meeting (as he did many others), explained the decision as follows:

> 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 said: "I agree that a person who has commited 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.[131]

Other observers, notably Nguyễn Quang Duy, in his article "Hồ Chí Minh's Role in the Land Reform,"[132] have, by looking at the written record (and applying common sense, as it seems to me), 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 Nguyễn Thị Năm, which we will now examine. The first five were long, journalistic "accounts" of what was allegedly transpiring with her case. The sixth and final article, written by Nguyễn Tất Thành under his pseudonym "C.B.", was a brief summary of her alleged crimes, apparently written for the purpose of assuring readers that her punishment had been just. Actually, in light of Hoàng Tùng's account mentioned above, it is interesting to note that the articles in *The People* left Nguyễn Thị Năm's ultimate fate unclear, making no mention of the fact that she had been executed (whereas this information was supplied in the handful of accounts of male "cruel and despotic landlords"). The omission in Thị Năm's case suggests that there may have been some truth to Hoàng Tùng's account about Nguyễn Tất Thành's concerns regarding how her execution would be perceived by the Western world. As has been noted, the Party leaders themselves handled Thị Năm's case with the intention that it would serve as a source of guidance and inspiration for members of the Party and government apparatus and perhaps, to a lesser extent, the general public. The press coverage of her case provides an introduction to some of the typical accusations that would be leveled against tens of thousands of unfortunate villagers over the following three years.

Act 1: Nguyễn Thị Năm—Traitor, Feudalist, Saboteur, Spy, Sadist

The narrative begins with the establishment of Nguyễn Thị Năm as a "cruel and despotic landlord" who "oppressed, exploited, and terrorized the peasants in a fiendish manner." Since the Party had introduced a policy of confiscating the land of "Vietnamese traitors" during the August Revolution, the highly implausible presence of a high-profile "traitor" in a community that had been under DRV control for the past seven years had to be explained:

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[131] Hoàng Tùng, "Memories of Uncle Hồ," 11.

[132] Nguyễn Quang Duy, "Vai trò của Hồ Chí Minh trong cải cách ruộng đất," [Hồ Chí Minh's Role in the Land Reform], January 20, 2007. Download from Talawas: http://www.talawas.org/talaDB/showFile.php?res=9078&rb=0401

> After the August Revolution, because the local peasants had not yet been mobilized, [Nguyễn Thị Năm's] henchmen had seized hold of the commune's administration and mass organizations, with the result that her crimes were hidden in the shadows.
>
> At the end of 1952, high-ranking cadres came to inspect the implementation of land policies at [Nguyễn Thị Năm's] Cát-hanh-Long plantation. Cadres mobilized local peasants to struggle. The blood-soaked crimes of the cruel and despotic landlord Nguyễn Thị Năm were brought to light by the peasant masses.[133]

The next section was subtitled "Allying with the French and Japanese Imperialists," and it firmly established Nguyễn Thị Năm's class background as a member of the "comprador bourgeoisie" from Hải Phòng. In 1942, she had bought her plantation in Thái Nguyên from a French colon. In addition to accusing her of allying with the French and then the Japanese, the article claimed that she had founded a branch of the nationalist Great Vietnam [Đại Việt] Party and carried out propaganda against the Viet Minh and communism. Again, it is extremely unlikely, bordering on impossible, that the top Party leaders would have stayed at her house had this been the case. Nevertheless, according to the article in *The People*, Nguyễn Thị Năm had "organized sweeps to arrest and torture many soldiers and members of the revolutionary masses in her locality. One time, she captured dozens of people and every night had her henchmen liquidate one or two of them." When the "people's liberation committee" of Đồng Bẩm, where her estate was located, had been established, she had "immediately sent her henchmen to report it to the Japanese enemy based in Bắc Giang so that they would come and crush [the committee]."

Since the land reform was a redistribution of local wealth rather than an injection of external wealth into the community, the campaign had a "zero-sum" quality to it that demanded a certain number of landlords. If there were not targets for confiscation, there would be no wealth for the Party to give to the local poor. This simple reality was something that Party leaders carrying out the Nghệ Tĩnh Soviet movement in 1930-31 had understood. In this sense, the greatest obstacle to the campaign was the contribution to the war effort made by local elites over the past seven years. This contribution could have been in the form of leading the local revolutionary apparatus, handing over rice, or, as was the case with Nguyễn Thị Năm and no doubt thousands of other local elites, having sons fight in the DRV army. These obvious, virtually irrefutable signs of loyalty arguably posed a serious challenge to the campaign from the perspective of the top Party leadership. Land reform cadres had to be taught how to twist, distort, and reinterpret these rock solid signs of loyalty so that they metamorphosed into evidence of the wicked deviousness of the landlord:

> After the August Revolution, [Nguyễn Thị Năm] pretended that she "loved her country' in order to serve as cover for her counterrevolutionary crimes."
>
> […]
>
> After the August Revolution, Thị Năm pretended to "support" the revolution, to "support" the resistance war. She "voluntarily donated" for the Government a few hundred hectares of land, but it was all bad land. She "voluntarily" participated in work for United Vietnam. But the whole time she continued to collect unused land rent and a whole series of other rents…[134]

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[133] N.D., "Vụ Cát-Hanh-Long: Phát động nông dân đấu tranh" [The Case of Cát-Hanh-Long: Mobilizing the Peasants to Struggle], *Nhân dân* [The People], no. 97, March 1, 1953.
[134] Ibid.

We saw this concern about the benevolent facade of alleged landlords in Nguyễn Tất Thành's speech above; it appears as a theme in *The People's* coverage of Nguyễn Thị Năm; and it would also become a standard feature of "land reform literature" created by DRV intellectuals to serve the campaign.

After establishing Thị Năm's relationship with the enemy, the article then turned toward a more specific description of her relationship with the dozens of peasants connected with her estate as tenant farmers or laborers. Some of the "crimes" leveled at Thị Năm are so close to the Party's own methods of squeezing more rice out of local communities for the war effort that the case seems at times to have been created specifically to shift the blame for these unpopular (but perhaps unavoidable) policies onto local landlords. For example, the Party leadership called repeatedly for local cadres to "raise the starting point" [nâng khỏi điểm] or the estimated yield from which the agricultural tax would be calculated. Nguyễn Thị Năm, according to the article, rented out three hectares, but collected taxes on four in order to "force" every share cropper to transform one extra hectare of uncultivated land into rice paddy. Whether this was true or not on Thị Năm's plantation will probably never be known, but we can recognize what was attributed to her in the article as essentially the same strategy for raising agriculture production practiced by the Party leadership. That is, connecting the tax level to productivity so that the percentage of the harvest paid in taxes was inversely related to the level of productivity.

Nguyễn Thị Năm was accused of crimes related to the harsh means used to collect land rents. And these also bear a striking resemblance to the brutal methods of tax collection sometimes practiced by local representatives of the DRV state.[135]

> With the coming of the harvest, when the peasants had not yet finished bringing in their crop, Thị Năm would send in her henchmen carrying guns to pressure the peasants into handing in their land rent and to paying back their debts. Whoever was slow to pay would have his land taken back or his house, buffalos, or farm tools confiscated. Whoever was lacking in rent would be dragged into a room on the plantation and locked up for torture.[136]

There were other similarities to the Party's policies as well, such as requiring peasants to pay their rice tax to the DRV even in years when the harvest was down. It is obvious that this was what had happened in 1950 when large sections of the Vietnamese North region slid into famine after the "general mobilization" for the Border Campaign in the fall of 1950. In the wake of that famine, the Party leadership had issued directives instructing local cadres in charge of tax collection that they should not take all of a family's rice.

The Nguyễn Thị Năm article devoted a couple of paragraphs to describing more mundane (and plausible) forms of basic economic "exploitation," some of which cohered with what was described in the September 1944 study of the estate by Vũ Đình Hòe. These included such things as taxing tenant farmers for their use of the estate's buffalos, for their use of the estate's forests as a source of firewood, for their use of its grass to feed an animal owned by the tenant, etc.

Mixed in with these plausible, normal economic aspects of the relationship between Nguyễn Thị Năm and her poor peasant tenants, however, were sensational and pornographic elements geared toward the establishment of her fiendish wickedness. For example, the fate of a

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[135] For an account of these methods applied in a Nghệ An village, see Võ Văn Trực, *Chuyện làng ngày ấy* [Village Story of that Time], [Hà Nội: Lao động, 1993].
[136] N.D., "The Case of Cát-Hanh-Long," *Nhân dân*, March 1, 1953.

peasant who had been late with his rent and "dragged" into a special room on the plantation for torture was described as follows:

> Four of her henchmen stood in the four corners of the room and kicked the peasant like a soccer ball. After that, they would jam a cattle prod into the peasant's mouth, breaking his teeth and spattering blood everywhere [tóe máu]. Or they would force the peasant to drink water until his stomach was full and then stomp on his stomach to make the water spurt out. Other times, they would pour fish sauce down a peasant's nose. During cold weather, peasants who were locked up would have to curl themselves into a ball, with no rice and nice mat. Every now and then, Nguyễn Thị Năm's henchmen would force a peasant to take off his clothes and then dump buckets of water over him. Sometimes, they would put a bucket of water with a hole in over the peasant's head. The water would drip onto the peasant's head, causing terrible pain. Many people who were tortured by them survived only a few days before dying.[137]

The list of crimes then shifted to ones against women and children, apparently to make the landlord seem as though he or she was a threat to the very existence of the Vietnamese race: "a pregnant woman was punched and her foetus collapsed; there was a young child who mistakenly allowed a buffalo to drink water near Nguyễn Thị Năm's house—he was struck in the head and killed, his body tossed into the river." When one man tried to oppose Nguyễn Thị Năm, she "immediately seized his two sons and brought them home for toture." One was beaten to death and "set adrift on the river." The other son escaped, but also died. "As a rough calculation, the number of people tortured to death by Nguyễn Thị Năm or dragged away and killed secretly by her is about thirty."[138] (One can understand why her family struggled for years to have her name officially cleared of these charges.)

Act II: The Peasant Masses Begin to Awaken, their Hatred Begins to Boil

After this exhaustive account of her alleged crimes, *The People's* article moved to its second section, titled "Hatred Boils". The basic purpose of this section was to describe the process by which the land reform cadre brought the peasants together in a "speak bitterness" session. As the narrative goes, for the first time (thanks to the land reform), peasants were able to speak openly about how they have been victimized by the landlord (Nguyễn Thị Năm):

> The peasants' feelings of outrage toward Thị Năm and her henchmen had been smouldering in their hearts for many years now. With every session devoted to learning about the land policy and every session devoted to speaking bitterness [vạch khổ], their sense of outrage heightened and their spirit of struggle grew hotter like a spreading flame.[139]

These meetings organized by the mass mobilization cadre continued for a few weeks until the cadre felt that the peasants were ready to confront and denounce Thị Năm and her "henchmen" in a public meeting. In a sense, the meetings were like rehearsals where the main actors had a chance to learn and practice delivering their lines. Observing which peasants seemed to be the

[137] Ibid.
[138] Ibid.
[139] Ibid.

most effective denouncers, the land reform cadre could then arrange them in an appropriate lineup so that during the public performance, the audience would be led to the correct conclusion.

It was an important feature of all land reform literature to depict the peasants as enthusiastic and elated about the experience. As the article from *The People* described it, "Everybody said to each other: 'Even if it's cold I am going. Anybody who needs a jacket, I will lend you mine so that you can go.'" On the evening of December 20, 1952, "tens of thousands" of peasants came to attend the Great Meeting during which Nguyễn Thị Năm and her "henchmen" would be denounced publicly by the poor peasants she was alleged to have abused. The article from *The People*, with an eye toward education, included a sketch of the Great Meeting to show how these denunciation sessions were to be staged. The sketch and available pictures from the time give the impression of an outdoor theater, with the actors (the landlord and his denouncer) at center stage. Also on the stage, but off to the side, lies a long table and row of chairs facing toward the action at the center of the stage. This was apparently supposed to evoke the impression of a jury. Sitting at that table with a commanding view of the proceedings was the chairman of the mass mobilization brigade and "many poor peasants, one of whom was a woman."

After describing Nguyễn Thị Năm's crimes, describing the peasants' preparations for the showdown with her at the public struggle meeting, and then describing the proper way to stage the meeting, the article finally turned to the actual confrontation:

> When Thị Năm and Sergeant Hàm [đội Hàm] (her main accomplice) were led in, a round of shouts sounded forth, "Down with the cruel and despotic landlord Nguyễn Thị Năm!" "Hooray for the Party and Government's land policy." Thị Năm and Sergeant Hàm gave out a forced laugh and tried to hold their noses in the air. Immediately, tens of thousands of voices screamed out: "Make them bow their heads!" "Make them kneel down!" Before the power of the mobilized peasants, the prestige of cruel landlord started to crumble pitifully. One at a time, the peasants came up and denounced Thị Năm for her crimes, describing years of hardship and bitterness dating back to the period of the French. Mr. X clenched his teeth and remembered: "That day, my mother picked up almond leaves to take home for use in dyeing. When Thị Năm and her husband saw, [they] immediately grabbed and hit my mother until she coughed up blood. After that they searched through my mother's purse and took her last coin, saying that they were taking rent. My father went and asked [for the coin], but they also beat him up. A short while after returning home, my mother died. I can never forget that hatred…" Ms S, whose husband had been beaten to death by Thị Năm, clenched her first and, in a choked up voice, repeated again and again: "You killed my husband, I still feel that pain, I bitterly hate you!"

According to the article, the struggle session lasted six hours, with 40 different people being called up to denounce Nguyễn Thị Năm. "The later it became, the more seething became the atmosphere of hatred." Within the crowd of onlookers, there were many "sniffling sounds," with the "occasional sob bursting forth." When a denouncer described one of Nguyễn Thị Năm's crimes, the article explained, the crowd would shout out: "Make her pay for her crime!"

Act III: The Peasant Appraisal and the Promise of Further, Deeper Struggle

The final part of *The People's* account of the struggle against Nguyễn Thị Năm provided a description of how the peasants allegedly felt after having attended the six-hour struggle

session. It is obvious that, true to the spirit of socialist realism, *The People's* description was intended to teach readers how a good peasant was supposed to feel if the mass mobilization in a community was carried out correctly.

> At 3:00 in the morning, after Nguyễn Thị Năm signed a paper confessing to all her crimes, the meeting came to an end. On the way home, many people were highly moved [by the experience], half laughing half crying. "If we didn't have Chairman Hồ, the Party, and the Government, then how could we have had what we had today?"
>
> After the struggle, the local peasants were full of enthusiasm, organizing a round of production emulation [thi đua sản xuất] to celebrate the victory. Every member of the Peasant National Salvation Association planted another *sào* of potatoes. Some houses planted extra sugarcane. Both of the two communes [involved in the struggle], Đồng Bẩm and Dân Chủ, made a push with agricultural tax work.

The concluding paragraph of *The People's* article pulled back from the peasant view and gave a broader assessment of what had happened in the first struggle session, making sure readers understood that what had been described was only the beginning of a longer process.

> However, the mobilization of peasants on the Cát-hanh-Long plantation this time only brought back first results. The mass mobilization *is still superficial, not yet truly wide and deep, and it had many serious shortcomings.* Now, the mobilization is continuing to develop in the light of profound directives from above and the valuable lessons drawn from the experience of the past two waves… [140]

Intermission: Putting Nguyễn Thị Năm's Case to Use

The second article dealing with Nguyễn Thị Năm was titled "An Important Meeting," and it appeared a week later in the March 6, 1953 issue *The People*. The article actually was not an account of further activities in Thị Năm's commune. Instead, it dealt with the presentation of the new land policy (i.e. mass mobilization) to the Joint Meeting of the National Assembly Standing Committee [Ban Thường trực Quốc hội] and the National Executive Committee of United Vietnam, which took place over a span of two days immediately following the conclusion of the 4th Plenum of the Party Executive (February 25, 1953). According to the article, in attendance at this Joint Meeting were over 50 representatives of various government bodies: the members of the National Assembly Standing Committee, the Executive Board of United Vietnam, representatives of political parties, religions, and mass organizations with the United Vietnam Front, ministers and vice-ministeries of government ministries, a number of intellectuals and notables, and even representatives from Cambodia and Laos. Perhaps to bolster the humanitarian credentials of the group gathered by the Party leadership to approve the new land policy, *The People* pointed out that "recently returned" members of the DRV delegation that had attended the Asia-Pacific Peace Conference and the World Conference for the Protection of Peace had visited the "Joint Meeting".

At the meeting, Trường Chinh delivered the key address explaining to those in attendance why the DRV needed to move forward with land reform.

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[140] Ibid.

> Attendees at the Joint Meeting listened attentively. Everybody increasingly recognized in a profound and concrete way that our Party is truly the party of the working class, of the working people, and of the Vietnamese people. Chairman Hồ and the Party always care about the lives of the masses, especially the peasants, the most reliable ally of the working class.[141]

We have already seen some signs of anxiety from the top Party leadership about the way in which the decision to embark upon land reform was made, that is, upon the recommendation of Stalin and perhaps Liu Shaoqi to Nguyễn Tất Thành while the latter was in Moscow attending the 19th CPSU Congress. Some signs of that anxiety appear again in this article, which makes a point of stressing that the "land reform" [cải cách điền địa] carried out by the French-backed State of Vietnam government was done "according to the order of their French and American patrons." As for the DRV's land reform, "the putting forward of the issue of mass mobilization for the implementation of land policy during this year is clear proof that our Party, that our people's state, under the leadership of Chairman Hồ, always serves the people and the Fatherland with heart and soul [một lòng một dạ]." With a desire to establish the move to land reform as having stemmed entirely from the internal conditions in Vietnam (rather than the assessment of external observers), the article ironically mentioned the importance of Trường Chinh's "On the Vietnamese Revolution," which, as we saw, the general secretary had carefully rewritten to make it anticipate the current policy. "During the rest breaks, many representatives were still attempting to borrow a copy of 'On the Vietnamese Revolution,' written by comrade Trường Chinh, in order to consult [more material]."

The "important meeting" was also an occasion when participants supposedly developed a greater understanding and appreciation of Hồ Chí Minh's goodness:

> Pervaded with a sense of appreciation for the good services provided by Chairman Hồ and the Party, a representative of the National Peasant Liaison Committee stated: "Chairman Hồ has seen clearly the miserable situation of the peasants, has sympathized with their feeling of disadvantage [thiệt thòi quyền lợi]. He has reminded us that we need to resolve the pressing desires of the peasants. The peasants are inspired by those words of Chairman Hồ…"[142]

The third and final section of the article from *The People* was under the heading, "Through rigorous debate, the issue is further illuminated." It was common for official descriptions of high-level government meetings to paint a picture of them as lively and open affairs where the fate of a policy proposed by the Party leadership was not a foregone conclusion. In the narrative put forward by *The People*, those representatives attending the Joint-Meeting were divided up into subgroups where they were able to "present all their ideas and concerns" about the new policy. According to the article, the "most intense" [gay go] issue was whether mobilizing the masses would harm the policy of "unity" that was the basis of the front strategy. "What if the peasants are mobilized and they commit "leftist" excesses?" In *The People's* account, the way that these concerns were allayed was through the presentation of Nguyễn Thị Năm's case by a peasant representative at various times throughout the Joint-Meeting.

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[141] H.Đ., "Một cuộc hội nghị quan trọng" [An Important Meeting], *Nhân dân* [The People], no. 98, March 6, 1953.
[142] Ibid.

> When they heard the crimes of the cruel landlord Cát-hanh-Long along with the feelings of misery experienced by those peasants who were in the grasp of her bloodsoaked hands, many representatives burst into tears and felt a sense of acute outrage. The experience of the mass mobilization in the case of Cát-hanh-Long proves concretely that *we can only be afraid of not mobilizing the masses, of course we cannot be afraid of the masses being too "leftist". The reason is that if the masses are sufficiently awakened, they are extremely clear-sighted, they struggle with extreme determination, and they are very disciplined. As such, the mobilization of the masses does not harm but actually strengthens unity*.[143]

Thus we can see that the spine-tingling denunciations leveled at Nguyễn Thị Năm, most of which were fabrications, were then used by the Party leadership to help convince new people of the justness of the land reform policy. This was one of the basic dynamics of the mass mobilization campaign. Again and again, people newly introduced to the policy (especially newly recruited land reform cadres) would be presented with the stirring and gruesome accounts of landlord crimes made by peasants during a recently completed round of mobilization.

Act IV: Addressing Mistakes, Preparing for the Second, Decisive Round of Struggle

The third article dealing with Nguyễn Thị Năm was published on April 1, 1953, a little less than a month after the second article. Titled "A Few Important Lessons," it returned to the specifics of her case, focusing on weaknesses that had appeared in the first round of struggle. Since the Party leadership had not yet had the government pass an official land reform law, discussion of Nguyễn Thị Năm's case had to, more or less, avoid direct mention of land reform as the second, more radical, more violent, and more decisive round of struggle that was to follow the initial rent reduction phase. But it is clear from the article in *The People* that it was written with this two-stage approach to mass mobilization—rent reduction followed a few months later by land reform—in mind. Thus the basic message of the article was the idea that the initial rent reduction phase had only been a "superficial" beginning in the struggle against the landlord class. While the first struggle described a month earlier had "achieved some results," it was clear upon reflection that the struggle had "many serious shortcomings." Generally speaking, "the mobilization was not yet deep and wide, and the peasants' power to struggle has not been harnessed to a high level."

This alleged failure to mobilize "deep and wide" stemmed primarily from the weakness of the cadres trained to carry out the mobilization. They had not yet "resolutely relied on the poor and landless peasants," meaning that the majority of the peasants who had been "oppressed and exploited" by Nguyễn Thị Năm had not yet participated in the struggle sessions. Similary, cadres were alleged to have "not yet raised the peasants' level of awakening to the right level."

> During the process of struggle, cadres have not made enough use of the actual experience of the masses themselves in order to educate them. Cadres have also not paid enough attention to the task of training [bồi dưỡng] backbone elements [to lead the struggle]. As a result of this, during the speak bitterness sessions, cadres have not yet been able to arouse the class feelings of the peasants connected with their hatred of the cruel landlords. Cadres have not yet turned each individual's hatred into the general hatred felt by the majority of the peasant masses.[144]

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[143] Ibid.
[144] Minh Nghĩa, "Mấy bài học lớn" [A Few Important Lessons], *Nhân dân* [The People], no. 104, April 1, 1953.

As a result of these cadre weaknesses, "the task of destroying the political prestige of the cruel landlord Nguyễn Thị Năm and her gang of henchmen has only achieved partial success, and the task of helping the peasants establish political predominance has not yet achieved more than limited results." Another "shortcoming" of the cadres was "lack of political vigilance."

> The cadre lacked the awareness to take precautionary measures and did not remind the peasants enough of the need to head off Nguyễn Thị Năm and her henchmen's schemes aimed at sabotaging the struggle. Nguyễn Thị Năm's gang of supporters exploited that weak spot in order to create a case of suicide so that they could falsely blame it on a zealous peasant and impede his activities. They also intended to sow divisions among the peasants, splitting them from a few wounded soldiers in the locality. [Their goal] was to pull to their side a number of backward peasants as a means of dispersing their land and hiding their belongings, rice, etc.[145]

Act V: The Land Reform Phase of the Mass Mobilization

The final act in the narrative of Nguyễn Thị Năm's case involved the return of another cadre to her community to finish the work that had been left incomplete by the preceding rent reduction cadre a few months before. The description of what transpired was largely similar to the earlier article in *The People*, but it did provide a few more details about the basic method that land reform cadres were to employ when they entered a community:

> At the end of last year, a team of cadres visited the two communes of Đồng bẩm and Dân chủ (Thái Nguyên), where peasants lived in the most extreme misery under the oppressive and exploitative yoke of the cruel landlord Nguyễn Thị Năm. From that point, [people in the community] saw cadres eating with, living with, and working with miserably poor peasants living in crude tents [lều lụp sụp]. During those times when the cadres when the cadres worked and ate with them, and even late at night, the respective tenant farmers told the cadre of all their hardships. The true face of Nguyễn Thị Năm gradually began to emerge in all its cruelty and horror. From a few poor landless peasants who were awakened, the cadre gradually "struck roots" [bắt rễ], moving to other poor and miserable families in the hamlet.[146]

The account in *The People* reiterated the task of cadres to organize speak bitterness sessions in preparation for another "struggle meeting" during which Nguyễn Thị Năm and her "henchmen" would be denounced again by poor peasants. Again, the narrative focused on the enthusiasm of the peasants, the surge of productivity that accrued in their community with the removal of the landlord yoke, the gratitude of the peasants toward Chairman Hồ and the Party, and even the mass mobilization's success as a crucial step bringing peasants toward that ultimate, though concealed, goal of agricultural collectivization. Freed from the divisive effect of local landlords, peasants were able to join together and form "work exchange teams" [tổ đổi công], which were supposed to be the seed from which the "voluntary" movement to collective farms would grow. All these positives were underpinned by another laundary list of heinous

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[145] Ibid.
[146] T.Đ., "Đại hội nông dân đấu tranh" [The Peasant Struggle Meeting], *Nhân dân* [The People], no. 122, July 6, 1953.

fabricated crimes alleged to have been committed by "Nguyễn Thị Năm and her henchmen," which were supposed to have raised the peasant furor to even greater heights. At one point, the article described the denunciation of Thị Năm by a girl alleged to be one of her adopted children. (The article had claimed that Thị Năm had adopted 20 orphaned children "for exploitation," but the majority had "gradually died" as a result of her "exploitation and savage repression.") According to the narrative, though, one surviving adopted child was able to take center stage and publicly denounce her mother Thị Năm at the struggle session:

> [Nguyễn Thị Năm's adopted daughter], holding her ripped shirt-tails, pointed her finger at Năm's face and screamed: "Năm, do you know how many of my friends you killed?" Everybody shouted: "Slap her in the face a few times!" The sound of people cursing the cruel landlord Nguyễn Thị Năm roared outward toward the forests surrounding the Meeting. The small, scraggy hand of the child struck Thị Năm as though venting all her feelings of hatred. A number of people pushed forward, wating for their chance to punch Thị Năm. But the chairman of the [mass mobilization] brigade intervened, saying: "Our hands are for production, for work in the resistance war, of couse we have no desire to dirty them further by striking this cruel wench [con mụ gian ác này]."[147]

Occasionally in *The People's* narrative of Nguyễn Thị Năm's case, details were provided that coincided with the study of the plantation conducted by Vũ Đình Hòe for his September 1944 article in *Forum*. For example, *The People* reported that in 1944 Nguyễn Thị Năm had recruited 37 laboring families (about 200 people) to farm her plantation's land under the proviso that they clear more forested land for farming. "A few months later, 32 of the 37 families had died, not a soul remaining, with about 200 dead in total." While the author of the *Forum* article on Nguyễn Thị Năm's Cát-hanh-Long plantation mentioned the typically difficult situation of its share-croppers, even interviewing a few of them, he presented nothing in the article that suggested he saw signs of what was later alleged in *The People's* account.

As mentioned earlier, the land reform campaign needed a minimum number of landlords in every community in order to make meaningful the redistribution of wealth that was supposed to take place. Thus it was crucial that cadres be able overcome the inevitable countervailing evidence that local landlords and their defenders were certain to muster in order to undermine the case against them. In the case of Nguyễn Thị Năm, it appears that during the famine of early 1945, she may have taken under her wing a number of starving families from Thái Bình province, one of the worst hit areas during that terrible episode. It is also possible, though, that this deed (helping families during the famine) was made up for heuristic purposes to demonstrate how cadres should turn evidence in a landlord's favor against him.

> Cunningly dishonest, Thị Năm took advantage of the years of hunger and deprivation from lost harvests by pretending to be charitable and righteous while actually exploiting them savagely. During the famine of 1945, she accepted about 67 sufferers from Thái bình. She promised to give them three pecks [đấu] of rice every day in order to force them to work on her plantation. But she only gave all 67 of them one peck of rice a day. Cold and exhausted, over thirty of them starved to death in a few days. Those who remained had to make a special effort to little by little head to some other place.[148]

[147] Ibid.
[148] Ibid.

Epilogue: Nguyễn Tất Thành's Final Assessment of the Case

The last article in *The People* dealing with Nguyễn Thị Năm's case was written by Nguyễn Tất Thành under his pseudonym "C.B.," the one which the DRV leader used mostly for his Leninist-flavored column titled "Speak and Listen" [Nói mà nghe]. Thành titled his "Speak and Listen" article "The Landlord is Cruel and Horrifying [Địa chủ ác ghê]". His assessment was entirely in the spirit of the five earlier articles, with 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, heavy loan interests, 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![149]

The second part of Thành's article focused on alleged methods of torture practiced by Thị Năm and her supporters in Đồng Bẩm, essentially rehashing what had already been described in the previous articles about the case in *The People*: tying the peasants up and hanging them from the rafters of her house, jamming cattle prods in their mouths, pumping water in their stomaches 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, etc.

The third and final part of Nguyễn Tất 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 Đồng 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.*

[149] C.B. [Nguyễn Tất Thành], "Địa chủ ác ghê" [The Landlord is Cruel and Horrifying], *Nhân dân* [The People], no. 125, July 21, 1953.

C.B. [150]

The case of Nguyễn Thị Năm, along with other things such as the editing of old speeches, the redefinition of old terms such as "national revolution," and the guided, pre-determined nature of the "Inspection of the Countryside" carried out just before the land reform began, bely the later narrative of "deviation" that the Party leaders would adopt to explain the violence and injustice of the land reform. It is apparent that the use of half-truths, distortions, and slander began with the Party leaders themselves and was transmitted from on high down to bourgeois cadres recruited from the DRV bureaucracy to carry out the campaign.

In the next chapter, we will look at the problem of hunger in the countryside as it was described and analyzed by people at different levels in the DRV apparatus. We will examine these descriptions with an eye toward piecing together the rural economic situation that most land reform cadres were likely to have encountered as they entered their assigned villages. Of particular interest is the role that "landlords" or rural elites played in communities that were suffering from serious food shortages in 1953, when the regime first stated carrying out land reform.

[150] Ibid.

Chapter 2

Investigating the Causes Behind and Solutions to Hunger in 1953

A crucial factor that set the backdrop for the move to mass mobilization was the spread of famine [nạn đói] throughout most of Vietnam, but especially in those areas under DRV control, from late 1952 up through 1953. In Vietnam's National Archives III, I was able to examine a large file devoted exclusively to the issue of famine and famine prevention efforts in 1953.[151] The file contains over five hundred pages of reports from all five of the DRV's zones: The Vietnamese North (those provinces to the northwest of Hà Nội, The Left Bank (provinces to the east and northeast of Hà Nội), Interzone 3 (the area to the west and southwest of Hà Nội), Interzone 4 (Central Vietnam or Annam), and Interzone 5 (South Vietnam or Cochinchina). It is primarily the contents of this large file that form the basis of this chapter.

With so much information on one topic concentrated in one place, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that there were other important things happening at the time as well, especially on the military front. Nevertheless, an examination of the VWP's discourse on famine and the actual moves made by the regime to address the situation suggest that the issue of hunger posed a serious threat to the achievement of the regime's military, political, and ideological goals. In late 1953, they distributed throughout Vietnam 500 tons of rice for famine relief. (In another effort to build up the prestige of "Uncle Hồ," Nguyễn Tất Thành and the Party leaders had determined that this rice aid would be called "Uncle Hồ's Rice," and presented to starving peasants as a gift from their leader.

The regime's trouble with famine appears to have begun back in 1950 as the result of its "general mobilization" for the newly created army's Border Campaign against the French Union forces along Route 4 next to the Chinese border. Judging from internal documents, numerous villages in the Vietnamese North interzone had most of their rice requisitioned by the regime for the campaign. This generated famine conditions in large sections of the region during late 1950 and the first half of 1951. The crisis appears to have eased somewhat for the year-long period from the summer of 1951 until the summer of 1952, before building again to a much more widespread and serious level in 1953. Perhaps unusually, considering the South's traditional abundance of food relative to the Vietnam's central and northern regions, it was there that a lack of food seems to have become most serious again during the latter part of 1952, with the other regions of the country all following suit throughout 1953. A resolution released after the meeting of the Party leaders of Interzone 5 (southern Vietnam) in October 1952 explained that the problem of famine had begun to grow serious after July of that year. The Party leaders of Interzone 5 estimated that about 230,000 people were suffering from hunger and that 70,000 people were starving (bị đói nặng). The resolution reported that "over 1000 people had starved to death and a large number of people were suffering from oedema, scabies, and exhaustion from

[151] TTLT 3, PPTT 2855 Nghị Quyết, Biên bản, Báo cáo, Công văn của Ban Kinh tế CP, Ban Văn hóa Xã hội, Bộ Nội vụ, Bộ Canh nông, Bộ Công thương, Uỷ ban Kháng chiến Hành chính các Tỉnh về tình hình đói và công tác phòng chống đói 1953. [File 2855 from the Office of the Prime Minister: Resolutions, Minutes, Reports, and Official Correspondence from the Department of Economics, the Department of Culture and Society, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Industry, and Provincial Resistance Committees on famine situation and work of fighting famine."

lack of food, with the risk of also starving to death."[152] A separate October 1952 report (also from the Southern zone) that was placed in the above-mentioned archival file on hunger for 1953 provides a more general view of the impact of famine. It shows how the inability to collect enough rice, created by famine conditions, jeopardized virtually everything that the VWP was trying to accomplish:

> [The spread of famine] will impact our ability to carry out our economic policies. In particular, for the coming agricultural tax, we will not be able to guarantee our level, and our expected budget will be difficult to maintain. The tasks of stabilizing market prices, of [increasing] production and implementing economies will also be seriously impacted. Of special importance is the impact of the situation on our military activities in the interzone (Quảng Nam and Đà Nẵng). These activities will have to be cut back because supply for the military will meet with extreme difficulties.[153]

When we consider how difficult the DRV's economic situation was, what a struggle it had been to collect enough rice to feed the army and government over the past six years, and, in general, the enormous political cost incurred by the regime as a result of its economic demands upon the people, we can begin to understand how painful it must have been for the Party leaders to pull 500 tons of rice from the military effort and channel it back into the civilian population in the latter part of 1952.

In their explanations for the food crisis, the DRV leaders frequently blamed French Union military sweeps that caused damage to crops, but these sweeps probably only impacted a small portion of the areas suffering from hunger. Limited in numbers, the French Union forces had no choice but to focus what troops they had on the defense of key cities and other important economic enclaves, leaving large territories of the Vietnamese countryside completely to the DRV. Yet the VWP leadership were desperate to link rural hardships to the enemy (either the French, the anticommunist State of Vietnam, or, increasingly, the landlord class) rather than to the exactions imposed upon peasants by the DRV state.

One of the most bizarre manifestations of this tendency was the VWP leadership's creation of an entire propaganda campaign aimed at convincing peasants that an (alleged) rice-crop-eating insect plague had been created by the French Union forces. The Party general secretary, Trường Chinh, introduced this obviously fabricated idea at the January 1953 4th Plenum (discussed in the previous chapter). "Recently, based on zone reports, the enemy has used the incredibly wicked scheme of destroying the harvest through the release of insects."[154] 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."[155]

The Party leaders wanted Vietnamese peasants, rank-and-file cadres, and, as it appears, even Central Committee members, to believe that the French were now loading airplanes full of insects and dropping them in DRV-controlled areas to ruin the rice crop. Apparently, the idea was to inspire local peasants to think of the enemy when they saw insects eating crops. But we also cannot rule out the possibility that the entire narrative of insect plague had been put forward

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[152] "Nghị quyết Hội nghị Liên khu ủy V lần thứ ba, 3-6/10/1952" [Resolution of the 3rd Plenum of the Interzone 5 Party Leadership, 3-6/10/1952], *VKDTT 1952*, 481.
[153] TTLT3, PPTT 2855.
[154] Trường Chinh, "Report from January 1953 4th Plenum," *VKDTT*, 46.
[155] Ibid, 75.

or exaggerated by the Party leaders as a plausible external explanation for the failures in production that contributed to the growing food crisis.

The following chapter looks at the discourse on hunger in the DRV, starting with the statements from the top Party leaders and moving down through the levels, concluding with a brief report on eleven hungry people in one hamlet produced by a district-level cadre sent to inspect a struggling commune under his purview. Among other things, what we will see is that the ideological imperatives of the top Party leaders precluded any direct public engagement on their part with the questions raised by the most detailed on-the-ground investigation of why certain people in one community had run out of food.

The View from the Top: Phạm Văn Đồng's "Directive on Famine Prevention and Relief" (May 12, 1953).

The DRV prime minister Phạm Văn Đồng's roughly six-page directive on famine was divided into three sections. The first was titled "General Conclusions on Famine;" the second, "Zealously Develop Production and Carry out Rationing [tiết kiệm]; and the third was titled "Famine Relief Work." His directive 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." Since July of 1952, Đồng noted, areas of southern Vietnam controlled by the DRV have suffered from "serious" hunger on a "continuous" basis. This was also the case in much of central Vietnam, including those provinces of Interzone 4 that had been under DRV control since the August Revolution, and in the North, in Red River delta areas controlled by the State of Vietnam, and in areas of the Northwest that had recently come under DRV control. In his directive, Đồng did not mention Interzone 3 (to the west of Hà Nội) nor the Vietnamese North region (to the northwest of Hà Nội), but these regions also featured prominently in the archival file as struggling with famine.

All reports on famine, whatever the level from which they originated, addressed the issue of what the reasons were behind the presence of famine in certain regions, communities, or, at the lowest level, households. Phạm Văn Đồng's analysis divided the causes of the famine into two categories, "objective" and "subjective."

"Objective" and "Subjective" Factors Leading to Famine

"Objective" factors included three key things: the difficulties created by the war (enemy sweeps and efforts at economic sabotage), difficulties created by nature (bad weather leading to floods and drought), and feudalist exploitation:

> The regime of feudalist 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 they could give them loans 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.[156]

Though feudal exploitation, enemy attacks and sabotage, and climatic challenges played a "definite role" in the spread of famine, stated Phạm Văn Đồng, "we do not throw our hands up in the air in the face of those causes."

With better attention to the "subjective causes" of the famine, the "objective ones" could be overcome. As such, local cadres needed to do a better job of preparing communities to deal with the challenges posed by the war, the weather, and the feudalist exploiters. "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 the third factor, feudalist exploitation, Phạm Văn Đồng pointed out that local cadres also had the Party's land policies, the "people's government," and the "forces of the masses" in their corner. This was "enough strength," he stressed, to fight against the "illegal exploitation practiced by the landlords."

> 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.
>
> We should not blame objective difficulties, but rather carry out serious self-criticism with respect to the above shortcomings so as to come to a correct recognition about famine prevention and relief work. [This should lead to] a zealous correction and reform of one's work.[157]

The middle section of Phạm Văn Đồng's directive (Zealously Develop Production and Economization) exhorted local cadres to do more to increase production, to "correctly implement the Government's production and econonomization plan," to focus on producing grains such as rice, potatoes, corn, and manioc. Local cadres should lead local people so that they "produced enough to eat and enough to store." Part of this meant "thoroughly implementing the directives of the Government with respect to anti-flood and anti-drought measures." Another part was to fight against the enemy's efforts at sabotage such as destroying the harvest, agricultural tools, and irrigation networks.

Local Solutions to the Famine

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[156] Phạm Văn Đồng, "Chỉ thị của Ban Bí thư, 12/5/1953: Về phòng đói và cứu đói" [Secretariat Directive, 12/5/1953: Famine Prevention and Famine Relief], *VKDTT 1953*, 208.
[157] Ibid, 209.

The third section of the prime minister's May 12 directive on famine provided some specifics about what to do in the short-term. Đồng stressed that, if at all possible, local cadres should solve the problem using local resources rather than compel the regime to give up some of the precious rice it had 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 had not yet run out of 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 [một số] 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 those who are hungry who can be used for work such as transport, road repair, irrigation, etc.
> 4. 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.[158]

As was frequently the case with the Party leaders, they wanted local cadres to carry out meetings to discuss the prescriptions put forward in the directive and to come up with 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*." This meant "mobilizing, organizing, and leading the masses, bringing democracy and the positive force of the masses into play…"

A month and a half later, though, on July 30, 1953, Phạm Văn Đồng released a directive titled "On Economic and Production [sản xuất tiết kiệm] Work." Though not specifically directed at the issue of famine, the food crisis was one of the directive's main concerns. It essentially repeated the main points of the earlier directive on famine (enemy sabotage, weather, exploitation, poor work by local cadres, etc.), and reiterated that weaknesses in local leadership should be "seen as the main overall reason for the situation of scarcity and hunger in the countryside." But Đồng did acknowledge that "shortcomings in tax collection (especially the agricultural tax), the mobilization of people's laborers, corruption, waste, and bureaucratism had some influence on the situation."[159]

Phạm Văn Đông's Guarded Recognition of the Relationship between DRV Tax Policies and the Problem of Hunger:

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[158] Ibid, 210-211.

[159] Tô [Phạm Văn Đồng], "Chỉ thị của Ban Bí thư, 30/7/1953: Về công tác kinh tế tài chính và sản xuất tiết kiệm" [Secretariat Directive, 30/7/1953: Economic-Financial Work and Production-Economization], *VKDTT 1953*, 266.

With respect to the agricultural tax (which will feature much more prominently in subsequent discussions of the famine by people lower on the rung of power), the Party leaders decided to raise the minimum production level from 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 agricultural tax. The Party leaders also called for a five percent reduction in the rate of "supplemental tax" that was to be paid to the local administration for their use. More importantly, though, Phạm Văn Đồng stated that the government would not collect any more than 20% of a peasants' harvest. These moves were made to "ensure supply for the resistance war while at the same time lightening the contribution provided by the small producers and the laboring poor."[160] 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 be back to figuring out ways of raising the agricultural tax level in the countryside to improve their difficult financial situation.

Famine as Seen by the Central Committee's Subcommittee for Peasant Mobilization [tiểu ban nông vận]

The Central Committee's Peasant Mobilization Subcommittee was the bureaucratic organ that would, a few months later, be turned into the "Land Reform Mininstry." A sign of the power of this subcommittee in 1953 was the list of recipients of its report. Most internal documents were directed toward particular offices or ministries. The Peasant Mobilization Subcommittee's report on famine was simply addressed to: "Uncle [Bác or Nguyễn Tất Thành], 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 Viết Thắng]. It is clear that the Subcommittee was working directly and intimately with these top Party leaders.

The Subcommittee's report began with a brief survey of the various interzones in Vietnam, noting a few specific provinces and regions where the food situation was especially critical. For example, in Hà Đông, just south of Hà Nội, the report noted ten communes where "just about all of the people are short on rice, with only rich peasants and landlords having spare rice to eat; the majority of those who are hungry being 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's assessment was close to the later assessment offered by Phạm Văn Đồng in his official directive:

> Causes:
>
> 1. At all levels, there is a lack of vigor in implementing the Party's land policies. The peasants have not yet received much guidance and training and they are still exploited terribly, still have to take out high-interest loans. (In the Left Bank region, there is a hamlet named Tiên Lâm which was forced to pay back a debt of over 2,000 barrels of rice to the Bùi Hoài Church. In the Hải Dương hamlet of Bích Xương, land rents have been raised.

[160] Ibid, 270.

2. The enemy has zealously sabotaged the harvest, has burned rice stores, has hindered agricultural production, and sucked [thu hút] our rice into the cities. (In Thái Nguyên, they burned 18 tons of rice and dumped another seven tons into a pond…)
3. Natural disasters, floods, drought, and insects. In Interzone 4, there was major flooding in October of 1952 and then more rain the first months of the year which further hurt things, reducing the development of the spring crop. In Thái Nguyên, mice have wrecked many crops, destroying as much 4/5 of the crop in some places. Poor yields have reduced productivity in some places ¾.

With respect to measures put forward by the Peasant Mobilization Subcommittee, they were essentially the same as those advanced more generally by the Party leadership. There was no mention of the agricultural tax in this March 1953 document as a factor leading to famine. But it is interesting to note that the Subcommittee concluded its assessment of the famine's causes with the following statement, no doubt inspired by the reports that they had read: "In our opinion, it is very easy for cadres, comrades, and people to have false perceptions about [the reasons for famine], to fall victim to the enemy's counterpropaganda stating that the famine is primarily a result of the agricultural tax." It is possible that this was a cautious way of letting the Party leaders know that many people at the local level placed some blame for the food crisis on the agricultural tax (that is, without the report writer questioning the correctness of the agricultural tax).

Some Views of Famine from Interzone and Provincial Level

1. Zone 5: South Vietnam

As we saw above, the Party leadership at the beginning of 1953 saw Zone 5 as the region where the problem of hunger was the most serious. The report to the prime minister's office from Zone 5 was written by the chairman of the Interzone 5 Economic Committee [Ủy ban kinh tế tài chính]. Actually, the document was officially not a "report" [báo cáo] per se but rather a "Self-Criticism [kiểm thảo] on the Reasons for the Growth of Famine." The carrying out of a "self-criticism" was a highly structured and hierarchical ritual that did not offer the subject much room for maneuver. Essentially, one of the Party leaders would decide that some negative phenomenon (famine, in this case) was to be attributed to certain shortcomings of a person or a committee that was lower down in the hierarchy and more directly involved in the issue at hand. In setting up the "self-criticism," the Party leader would choose certain general areas and require the person carrying out the self-criticism to fill in the details showing how he and his co-workers had underperformed in those areas.

The conclusion of the "self-criticism" was never in doubt, and we can assume that the content of the one written by the head of the Interzone 5 Economic Committee reflects the original prompt sent to him by his superior.

> The main reason for the appearance of famine is weaknesses in our leadership. We have lacked the mass perspective, we have not attended to the people's livelihood enough, and we have lacked a sense of responsibility toward the people.

> On the basis of that mentality, we have not yet zealously led in the field of production and we have lacked resolve in overcoming challenges presented by the natural elements and by the enemy. Our leadership of finance, banking, and commerce has not yet been close enough [to the situation in the ground] and it has lacked coordination.
>
> Our leadership style has been amateurish: we have not anticipated the situation well enough, we did not see that, with the people's reserves having been depleted, the loss of the harvest or destruction wrought by the enemy could lead to famine. We did not grasp the actual situation at the local level; we were not in touch with what was going on below us [in the state administration], and we were not in touch with the people. We [cấp trên] suspected that those below us were exaggerating the famine in order to lighten the agricultural tax.[161]

All of the details of the "Self-Criticism on the Causes of Famine" were supposed to add up to the above conclusions. Nevertheless, despite the predetermined character of the document, with a cautious reading, it does help us to sketch out some of the basic elements of the situation.

The food situation in Interzone 5 in January 1953 was serious, according to the self-criticism, because there was an agricultural shortfall of 30 percent. That is, the ministry's production goal had been for 700,000 tons of rice to be harvested in DRV-controlled areas, while 630,000 tons was considered to be the minimum production level needed to cover the interzone's basic needs. According to the report, the production level was only 500,000 tons of rice. The provinces in the zone that were in the biggest trouble were Quảng Nam and Quảng Ngãi, the two provinces in the southern part of Central Vietnam below Đà Nẵng. The situation in general for Interzone 5 had been difficult since 1951, as the self-criticism explained:

> We were able to overcome the famine in 1951 because the people still had rice stores. Toward the end of 1952, the Interzone [leadership] carried out a policy of pushing [the people] to increase agricultural production and to implement economies in order to fight against famine.
>
> But the primary reason for the lost harvests of 1951 and 1952 was drought. Yet still, at the end of 1951, we only put forward the issue of irrigation very lightly, indeed, it was drowned out by other problems.
>
> We have not yet paid enough attention to developing irrigation and aquaculture [tiểu thủy nông]. We have not exerted out leadership in the protection of forests and in implementing farming methods that protect against drought.
>
> As a result of that, in 1952, the March harvest was also lost. Quảng Nam lost 40%, Quảng Ngãi 40%, Binh Định was okay, Phú Yên lost 15%. Over half of the manioc that had been planted in great quantities in the beginning of the year was lost as a result of drought. The potato crop also suffered serious losses (Quảng Yên lost nearly 70%). As a result, when the August [of 1952] harvest came, we were short of the food requirement by 150,000 tons. Famine broke out at the end of July in those areas that had suffered critical harvest losses.

After detailing the many difficulties caused by the French in the war, primarily through the destruction of infrastructure needed to transport goods, the self-crticism moved to a systematic admission of specific weaknesses in four categories: leadership of production, leadership of finances, leadership of banking, and leadership of commerce. (It appears that these

[161] Unless otherwise indicated, all of the documents discussed in the following section come from the archival file on famine in 1953 mentioned at the beginning of the chapter.

were the specific categories for which the self-criticizer had to fill in the details.) In light of the description of repeated lost harvests throughout 1951 and 1952 provided in the beginning of the document, it is interesting to note that the Party leaders of Interzone 5 had still attempted not just to collect, but also to increase, the agricultural tax level.

Under the category of "leadership in production," for example, the self-criticizer stated as his third of six shortcomings contributing to the famine, "[we] insufficiently connected our financial, banking, and commerce work with production, especially the agricultural tax—cadres tended to raise taxes instead of showing the people how to work." In the section devoted to "finance," the writer of the self-crticism stated that the "agricultural tax has not yet been implemented correctly so it has not yet served production." Again, as we saw earlier, the Party's theory about the agricultural tax held that local cadres would set a production goal for an individual producer. The agricultural tax would then be a certain percentage of that goal. The tax paid by the farmer who exceeded the production goal would be a lower percentage of his overall yield, while the tax paid by the farmer who fell short would be end up being a higher percentage of his overall yield. This tax method, the Party leaders assumed, would boost productivity by giving peasants an incentive to exceed the estimated yield. The agricultural tax came up again in the field of "commerce." As the self-criticism stated: "When we had large stores of rice collected from the agricultural tax, we did not sell it on the market, contributing to high rice prices (such as during March). When we did sell the rice on the market, we were too rigid in our setting of prices."

A similar narrative of bad economic timing negatively impacting production appears in the self-criticism's description of how the banking office and the commerce office had handled their duties:

> In first half of 1952, our distribution [of money] lacked planning and management. From July, we set out to distribute money only for the finance ministry's expenditures. We had no plan for the distribution of money to the Ministry of Trade in time for them to purchase stagnant agricultural goods as a means of raising production and creating jobs for the people.

In the section on finance, a similar narrative appears: "Our plan for reducing expenditures was not combined with a plan for solving the problem of stagnant goods…" And, in the section on commerce: "We did not find a market for the consumption of extra products, and we did not purchase those extra goods [ourselves]. When the Ministry of Commerce put forward the issue of purchasing [extra goods], we acted too slowly."

Unfortunately, the self-criticism did not reveal the total amount of rice collected in the interzone through the agricultural tax. Knowing that figure would help to shine some light on the overall economic situation. But if the self-criticism is roughly accurate in its claim that the interzone was 130,000 tons below what was considered to be the needed amount of rice production for the region, it would appear that the 500 tons of "Uncle Ho Rice" set aside for famine relief throughout the country in the latter part of 1952 would have been well short of what was needed to address the problem. The phenomena of "extra" unsold goods "stagnating" in warehouses with no buyer must have been especially maddening for the Party leadership. One of the main purposes of giving the state control over supply, distribution, and pricing (instead of relying on the 'invisible hand of the market') was to eliminate the capitalist "crises of overproduction" and, more generally, to inject rationality and efficiency into the nation's economic life. It appears that this move by the Party leaders had the opposite effect in practice. Since they were ideologically committed to such a move, though, its correctness had to be

protected from the facts on the ground by the self-criticisms of those put in charge of implementation.

2. Famine in the Left Bank Interzone

The "Left Bank" referred to the northern bank of the Red River, with the Left Bank zone comprising those provinces that were to the north of the Red River as it winds its way in a south-southeasterly direction down from Hà Nội to the South China Sea. The Left Bank zone comprised Red River delta provinces that were seen by the French command as the "useful" part of the delta and therefore worth contesting. As such, much of the region was not under the secure control of either side in 1953.

The archival documents on the famine situation in the Left Bank zone are primarily reports sent by members of the interzone's Resistance Committee [Ủy ban Kháng chiến Hành chính Liên khu Tả Ngạn] to Phạm Văn Đồng's "Office of the Prime Minister." The archival file contains reports from as early as January 1953 and as late as September of that year. The report from January, which we will discuss first, was produced by participants at a Meeting for Production and Anti-Famine Work for the Left Bank Interzone. The meeting was attended by eighteen people, all of whom held positions within the interzone apparatus: a member of the Committee for Economization [Ban Tiết kiệm], a cadre from the Ministry of Agriculture, two representatives of the Committee for People's Livelihood [Dân sinh], two provincial-level agricultural cadres (from Hải Dương and Thái Bình provinces), and twelve representatives of the Peasant Associations belonging to districts along the Luộc River (running west to east roughly through the center of the interzone).

The report from the meeting touched on the difficulties faced by various regions in the interzone. The fact that the meeting was attended by people working for the Ministry of Agriculture probably explains the more technical character of the report, which had relatively more discussion of the problems related to irrigation and the disruptions to agriculture caused by fighting in the region. The 1952 May harvest had apparently been quite bad, with reductions in both productivity and total acreage farmed seen in many places. The report stated that Thái Bình province had been the worst hit, with 50,000 mau of rice farmland left fallow. The total surface area of Thái Bình is roughly 430,000 mau, so 50,000 was a large chunk of the province's arable land. Things had apparently picked up, though, for the following October 1952 harvest, with overall productivity rising back up 15-30%.

What had been the causes of the famine conditions that arose in 1952? The January 1953 report listed the following basic reasons. First, the people lacked food because they lived in places that had been "attacked, destroyed, or pillaged" by the enemy or had had their production hindered in different ways such as through the destruction of their irrigation systems. Second, back in August of 1952, a number of hamlets suffering from hunger had been forced to harvest their rice prematurely, reducing their yields. Third, hungry peasants had also frequently been forced to pay off their debts at increasingly high rates of interest. Fourth, the enemy had forced residents of some hamlets to vacate to other places before destroying the village, meaning that the fields were left fallow. And fifth, there were "a few places" where residents had spent too much money and consumed too much food in marriage celebrations. This report was produced in January of 1953, before the Party leaders had begun the propaganda campaign for the coming land reform. It is interesting to note that there is no direct mention of landlord exploitation as a

cause of the famine—the closest thing was the mention of high-interest loans. This was also the case in the report's "general conclusions" section.

As for solutions to the problem of famine, the January report focused on ways of increasing production. One was to be better about having families come up with a "family plan" for how to be more successful in farming their land. The second was to put more energy into using the "national emulation movement" officially begun on December 19, 1952 (the anniversary of the DRV attack against the French in 1946 that had officially begun the resistance war). In the emulation movement, every hamlet was to mobilize people to carry out emulation for specific tasks related to production such as digging canals, planting duckweed in recently irrigated rice paddies, planting rice, raking grass, spreading fertilizer, etc. Each of these and other tasks were to be monitored by local cadres, who would record the results achieved with an eye toward public praise of people who were exemplary. Ideally, the cadre would "mobilize" the community to attack each of these tasks together in "waves." As the report explained:

> Take the "labor soldier" in the field of agriculture and use him as the engine [to spur on production]:
>
> - In January, the provincial level apparatus will organize a Meeting for Emulation Soldiers in the Field of Agriculture.
> - When the emulation soldiers return to their communities, welcoming celebrations will be organized for them.
> - We will congratulate them and provide them with letters of praise (the Province-level leaders will praise commune level emulation soldiers, the Interzone-level leadership will praise the Provincial-level emulation soldiers.
> - We will organize emulation soldier brigades to tour around publicizing their experiences and the results of the Emulation Movement Meeting. This will help to create a broad movement.
> - We will publish articles describing the successes of the emulation soldiers in the press and we will promote motivational slogans.
> - We will organize for commune level cadres to speak to hamlets, to publicize the results of the Emulation Meeting.
> - We will pay attention to raising the prestige of a commune's emulation soldiers. When the emulation soldier attends the Meeting, we should organize a send-off for him and ensure that people cover his essential tasks while he is gone.
> - We should publicize broadly the results of Hoàng Hanh.

A report on the famine situation written three months later on April 14, 1953 by the vice-chairman of the Left Bank Interzone Resistance Committee provided basic information to the Office of the Prime Minister on the districts impacted most by famine. Unlike the January report put together by agricultural specialists and representatives of local peasants' committees, which had mentioned barely anything about landlord exploitation as a factor leading to famine, this directive stated as the "main reasons": 1) "destruction by the enemy, being forced by the enemy to evacuate." 2) "heavy exploitation of land rents and high interest loans."

Generally speaking, the report divided each district into three sections. The first provided basic statistics on how many people were suffering from hunger (frequently broken down into

three or four degrees of severity) as well as how many people had enough food and even extra food. For example, the district of Tiên Lữ in the southwestern tip of Hưng Yên province, just a few kilometers away from the eastern bank of the Red River, was reported as follows. In the three communes where the situation was most critical, 387 families were only eating one meal every two or three days. In six other communes where the situation was less critical, of the 3,700 families, 372 had extra food, 1,010 had enough food, and 2,196 lacked food, eating only every other meal.

The second section was titled "Phenomena Created by Famine" and usually listed four to six things. For example, in Tiên Lữ district, four hamlets had reported families selling children. Three youths had gone to "work for the enemy." Some starving peasants had sold land. There were 59 reported incidents of "petty theft" [trộm vặt] and two incidents of stealing public rice. In some cases, "people were so hungry," the report stated, "that they did not flee when the enemy came." In one commune, the vice-chairman of the Party cell had asked to "take a break from his [revolutionary] work in order to support his family." The report on Tiên Lữ district was the only one of the district reports that, in addition to describing the actions of hungry people, described what some people were actually saying about the famine: "[Some people are] comlaining that the Government's agricultural tax is too heavy, and that is why they are hungry."

The third section, "Local Solutions," described briefly the measures taken in various districts to provide relief from the famine. Like the January report from three months earlier that had focused on raising production through the promotion of "emulation soldiers" [chiến sĩ thi đua], this April report stressed the importance of continued efforts to raise production. But now a new measure was added to list: the use of "struggle" by the masses to force landlords and rich peasants to provide loans to needy members of the community. As it was described in the district of Duyên Hà:

> Borrowed rice from landlords in the communes of Độc lập, Đoàn Hùng, Tam Điệp, and Hồng Phong, obtaining 3,218 baskets [thùng] of rice, which was distributed to 485 families. In Độc lập Commune, locals had to struggle with one landlord in order to borrow rice. But they lacked a plan and lacked preparation with respect to their mobilization of the masses to struggle. As a result, the local administration [chính quyền] had to step forward and struggle.

At the end of the report, the vice chairman of the Left Bank Resistance Committee discussed "strengths and weaknesses" of the way the famine had been handled recently. These were all expressed within the framework of the policies and views of the famine put forward by the Party leadership. Thus, on the "strengths" side, the vice-chairman of the Left Bank Resistance Committee stated that peasants had "zealously increased production," that DRV leaders in the interzone had "created a broad mass movement for mutual aid in offices, among cadres, and among the people." This had "strengthened unity" in the countryside, stated the report. Another strength was the "pushing forward of the mass mobilization movement for struggle," which had enabled people to borrow "extra" rice held by landlords and rich peasants. The fourth and final strength of anti-famine efforts in the Left Bank Interzone was the "creation of a mentality among the people that the main way of fighting famine was to zealously carry out measures on their own rather than relying too much on the Government."

With respect to the weaknesses, the vice-chairman's report mentioned typical organizational issues such as lack of careful monitoring of subordinates at the local level by those higher up in the government apparatus, lack of careful inspection at the local level, lack of timely intervention, and too much dependency on government aid. Accurately reflecting the

Party leaders' increasing stress on the class background of policy implementers at the local level as an explanation for disappointing results, the vice-chairman of the Left Bank Interzone Resistance Committee stated:

> With respect to cadres at the commune level, there are many people on the anti-famine mobilization committees who come from middle or rich peasant backgrounds. Their implementation of policies brings poor results because they themselves have enough to eat. They do not sympathize with the miseries of the people, and, as a result, they are not zealous in their work…

Two months later, on July 16, the vice-chairman of the Left Bank Interzone, Vũ Hùng, sent another report to the Office of the Prime Minister. The report was titled, "On the Reporting of Experience Borrowing Rice from Landlords and Rich Peasants and the Interzone's Policy on Carrying out Struggle for the Borrowing of Rice in Hải Dương [province]." It appears that Phạm Văn Đồng or some other high-ranking leader in the Prime Minister's Office had wanted to hear specifically about the results of these efforts by poor peasants to squeeze rice out of local elites. As was often the case with reports in the DRV apparatus, this one began with a careful description of the directions concerning the policy to be implemented. The key thing was that the Party leaders wanted local cadres to try to solve the problem of hunger first by forcing landlords and rich peasants in their communities to "cough up" [bỏ ra] their extra rice in the form of "loans" to hungry peasants. Only after this source of relief had been attempted should cadres turn to government aid.

The vice-chairman of Left Bank Interzone provided a list of six observations about how the "struggle" to compel local elites to lend rice had gone in Hải Dương province.

1. Communes were heavy on struggling to obtain rice from landlords, but of course did not try to explain to them or mobilize them. As a result, when [those carrying out the struggle to borrow rice] entered the houses of twelve landlords […] to get rice, the landlords were fearful and reluctant. One threw a grenade, which exploded, but caused no harm to anyone. [The peasants] were still able to get the rice while the landlord was taken back to the district headquarters, warned, and released.
2. Some communes, when they called rich peasants and landlords forward during struggle meetings in order to get their rice, immediately moved to the issue of rents, loan interest, and labor payments. And they used torture as a means of struggle (placing a gun next to the landlord's ear and firing it, beating [the landlord or rich peasant], forcing him to kneel and crawl, etc.). Middle and rich peasant cadres committed serious leftist excesses [tả nhiều] in order to show that they had a strong class political standpoint.
3. Some would carry out struggle against the wrong target, aiming their sights at and following middle peasants […].
4. Some struggle sessions have created uncertainty in the mind of middle and rich peasant cadres. Landlords have also not understood what the Party's policy is and what their future holds.
5. In some places, rich peasants and landlords have been lumped together into a block as struggle targets, with no effort made to unite with middle peasants. At times, middle peasants have even been pushed together with the rich peasants and landlords…

6. Between the government [chính quyền] and the Peasant Association there is mutual suspicion, which has reduced the prestige of the government significantly. In a number of communes in Ninh Giang district the struggle sessions have risen to a feverish pitch. A number of middle peasants, being afraid, have attempted to get the commune vice-chairman (a middle peasant) to protect and cover for them, but this comrade said that he is also terrified.

3. Famine in the Vietnamese North Interzone

The archival file on famine during the year 1953 contained relatively less information about the The Vietnamese North Interzone. The file did contain a few reports on the situation in the province of Vĩnh Phúc, which that lay to the northwest of Hà Nội, with a stretch of its western border formed by the Red River. The report on the province was written by the vice-chairman of the Vĩnh Phúc Resistance Committee for submission to the Vietnamese North Interzone Resistance Committee, the Central Committee's Economic Committee, the Ministry of Agricultural, and the Vĩnh Phúc Peasant Association. The report was dated September 20, 1953 and titled, "A Summary of Anti-Famine and Famine Relief Efforts."

The report began with statistics on hunger in the province divided up by district. According to the information gathered for the report, Vĩnh Phúc had nine districts comprising a total of 464,352 families. Of that total, 8,029 families were considered to be "lacking food" [thiếu thốn], that is, hungry, but not yet in danger, while 2,323 families in the province were considered to be "threatened by famine."

As with many of the other reports, this one explained the causes of the famine following the exact structure provided by the prime minister, Phạm Văn Đồng in his explanation, bolstering with details the prime minister's basic narrative: 1) enemy 2) weather 3) feudal exploitation. In keeping with Đồng's document, the report from Vĩnh Phúc described these three things as "objective reasons." As for "subjective reasons," again, following the prime minister's template, they were all shortcomings of the Vĩnh Phúc apparatus, and especially local-level cadres, who had "not yet recognized the importance of the issue of production…" They had not "absorbed the policy of relying on the strength of the people to solve the famine." They had "not yet focused on organizing mutual aid…" They had not "thoroughly explained the policy of loan interest reduction…" etc. etc. Tacked onto the end of these typical explanations was one related to the impact of the mass mobilization on the psyche of villagers and how that was impacting economic life.

> [Local cadres] have not explained the mass mobilization policy thoroughly enough. As a result, rich peasants and better-off middle peasants, who still have a little extra rice, do not dare to lend to anybody for fear that they will get a reputation for exploitation. They are afraid that if they lend [money or rice] today, tomorrow they will become targets of struggle.

On the other hand, the report complained of failure by local cadres to deter residents who were running low on food from borrowing money from landlords for rice purchases. Even if the lender did not charge interest on his loan, the fluctuation of rice prices meant that the borrower always ended up losing (from a financial perspective, at least). The ten dollars he borrowed from a landlord during September to buy rice when the supply was down and the demand high would enable him to buy only one basket. However, he would only be able to pay back that loan in October when his rice could be harvested. At that time, though, everything had reversed, with the

supply of rice high and the demand low, usually pulling the market price for rice down significantly. In order to obtain the cash needed to pay back the loan, the peasant would need to sell two baskets of rice instead of the one that he had purchased with his ten dollars during the lean period. If interest on a loan were factored into the equation, the borrower's poor market timing hurt him even more.

The Party leaders were hopeful that local cadres would help poor peasants break this cycle by distributing to them "Vietnamese traitor land" that had been confiscated from the regime's enemies in the countryide. Theoretically, by doing business with the DRV state, local peasants would enjoy lower interest rates when they did borrow money. The VWP leaders hoped that local cadres would teach poor members of the community to be better about rationing their rice and other food so that they would not run out, and perhaps also by 'pushing through' the lean period, if possible, rather than borrowing. As we have seen, the Party leaders also attempted to break this cycle by setting rice prices and by selling state rice during the leaner periods to keep prices more consistent throughout the year. Thus in the report on the Vietnamese North, it was with a tone of exasperation that the writer of the report noted that struggling peasants still seemed determined to borrow money during the lean times, "no matter how heavy the interest rate, they just keep borrowing—come October they will pay back the loan."

With respect to the methods used to alleviate hunger, the report described many of the normal practices: distributing rice from local stores, compelling landlords and rich peasants to reduce land rents, promoting mutual aid drives among members of the community, lending land to struggling families, organizing child support for parents struggling with large families, etc. As for adjustments to the DRV's tax policies, the report stated that Vĩnh Phúc province had "settled 200 tons of rice debt owed to the people by the government." This may have referred to the rice requisitioned (officially "borrowed") by the government during the "general mobilization" period in 1950-1951. In 1952, the report stated, the agricultural tax was reduced by 40 tons.

In general, the writer of the report complained that local cadres frequently exaggerated the extent of the hunger situation in their communities. For example, local cadres from the communes of Thông Nhất and Liên Châu had reported 259 families as hungry. The provincial leadership sent a cadre into the commune to inspect and to hold a discussion session [họp bình nghị] with residents during which it was determined that only twelve families actually qualified as being "hungry."

> According to discussion meetings held by the people in Yên Dương commune (Lập Thạch district), there are a number of families that are not actually suffering terribly from hunger. But they see others complaining of hunger so they do likewise. They see their poor neighbors borrow rice so they also fill out forms to borrow rice. They see that the government [trên] has put forward a policy of anti-famine and famine relief, so they say that they are also hungry and miserable.

4. Famine in Interzone 3

Interzone 3 was comprised of provinces that lay to the west and south of Hà Nội, including Nam Định and Ninh Bình, which had some of the largest Catholic communities in the country. The archival file on hunger in 1953 contained a number of 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, here and there, in the margins. It is likely that these were the comments of some high-ranking Party official and possibly the prime minister, Phạm Văn Đồng himself.

We saw in one of the reports from the Vietnamese North interzone (above) a provincial-level cadre complaining that local-level cadres were exaggerating the extent of the food crisis in some cases, perhaps to secure more aid from the government. It is interesting to note that just the opposite message came from one interzone-level report on hunger situation.

> Famine conditions 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 report on the hunger situation in Interzone 3 was written in February 1953. At that time, the Party leaders had only just begun their campaign to attribute a large amount of responsibility for the food crisis and other problems to "feudal exploitation." After that campaign had truly begun rolling (around March and April), and especially after Phạm Văn Đồng'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 were close to the reasons that would be advanced by Phạm Văn Đồng, but had the DRV state in the place where the feudal landlords would be.

> 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 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 commune). The people are concerned [thắc mắc]; cadres in the commune 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 the people "want the Government to pay back [thanh toán] its debts to them (the rice borrowed by the province, district, or commune)—the people would like to be able to subtract that debt from the agricultural tax." The people wanted to "definitively settle-up on the amount of rice tax they have paid so as to achieve some peace of mind." The report did not put "feudal exploitation" forward 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 Đồng. A section of that report described the situation in Nam Định province as follows:

> 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 commune) 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 commune 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.

In the above paragraph, the high-ranking Party leader who read the report underlined the third and fourth sentences describing the difficulties of landlord and rich peasant families. In the margin was written, "You were fooled!" with two large question marks underneath.

As we saw, Phạm Văn Đồng had released his directive on the famine in May, the impact of which appears immediately in the report on famine in Interzone 3 written on June 16, 1953. Clearly taking its cue from Đồng's directive, the writer of the famine report from Interzone 3 was quick to replicate in the "causes" section of the document what had been written by the Prime Minister: 1) the enemy 2) weather 3) feudal exploitation. Those were the "objective reasons" for the famine. As for the "subjective" reasons, they 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 on the list was the handling of the agricultural tax, but, in accordance with the new anti-lordlord wind coming from the Party leadership, the agricultural tax was explained in such a way that it 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, [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 communes 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 commune 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 have to pay more in taxes. This enables cadres to reduce the amount of taxes that landlords and rich peasants have to 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] was also a key factor contributing to the declines in production that were part of the food shortages. As he had with the agricultural tax, the writer of the June 16 report on famine described the policy of mandatory service as "people's porters" in such a way that all its negative side effects appeared to be the result of how the policy was implemented by supposedly corrupt local cadres rather than 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 commune 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 […]."

With the shift in policy toward resolving food shortages—as much as possible—through mobilization of the masses to pressure local elites into lending their extra rice, descriptions of how that process had unfolded became an increasingly important part of the reports. We saw evidence in the report's handling of the causes of the famine that the explanations had been adjusted to some extent so that they reflected the reasons for the food crisis put forward by Phạm Văn Đồng in particular and the Party leaders in general. As such, the report writer's account of how the "forced lendings" had proceded must be treated with caution.

It appears that the "forced lendings" were organized by the interzone level leadership and carried out by special "interzone level cadres" sent into chosen localities. In his assessment of how this approach fared, the report writer had 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 to some extent, writing that they had "grasped the guidelines" of the policy only "relatively well" [tương đối]. In his subsequent account of their "weaknesses," it becomes clear why his endorsement of their work was so lukewarm. The first of his eight complaints (the "most serious weakness") was that cadres had not "thoroughly grasped" the interzone leadership's intention that the "forced loans" were to be achieved through "mass pressure (and if need be, government pressure) to demand loans so as to alleviate famine, of course not yet to carry out mass mobilization."According to the report, some of these cadres had turned demands for loans into "struggle sessions" [cuộc đấu] where peasants would publicly denounce landlords for their alleged crimes.

One of the eight criticisms leveled at the implementation of these "forced lendings" 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, paint just the opposite picture.[162] One, for example, expressed frustration at the failure of some cadres to be discriminating in how they chose their targets for "forced lending."

> Cadres do not grasp the fact that the target is the stubborn [ngoan cố] landlords and rich peasants, meaning 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 [phân hóa] 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. A result of this is that in some places even middle peasants have become the target of struggle, with cadres operating under the slogan of "struggle" against anybody who has rice and money to force them to lend it. Or, cadres mechanically hold the view that all landlords are "stubborn" with the result 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 actually 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 Yên, 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 Thắng, there was an incident whereby a landlord's daughter was seized and tied up in a buffalo pen.

The writer of the report complained that cadres who were leading the peasants in carrying out these "forced lendings" did nothing to curb the "ardor" of the participants or intervene when things went beyond what were allegedly the guidelines of the "forced lending" policy. "There are some circumstances where [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 of this, the writer of the report complained, "cadres tacitly agree to allow the masses to beat landlords, holding that only through torture will the landlords cough up their belongings for the peasants to borrow."

Another theme of the report writer's criticisms with the "forced lendings" was the lack of careful preparation on the part of the cadres, especially with regard to finding out what things landlords and rich peasants had that could be "borrowed." 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

[162] Here we see what appears to be an example of a powerful but still second-tier Party leader using the linear analysis method (deviations right or left from a correct line) that was typically used by the Party leaders themselves to discuss the implementation of their policies. In this case, the approach seems to have been used by the zone-level Party leader as a means of protecting himself from the accusation of being "rightest".

into the house to take anything, including everyday things like trays, bowls, forks, and even fish sauce."

After putting forward these criticisms, the writer of the report moved to the issue of how the "forced lendings" were seen by the different classes in the countryside, starting with the beneficiaries of the policy, the poor peasants, and ending with the policy's targets, the landlords. With respect to the impact of the "forced lendings" on the village poor, the section began with a paragraph stating the overall positives. "Generally speaking, [the poor peasants] enthusiastically participate in the "forced lending," and, after successfully carrying it out, they believe in their strength and praise the Party and Government." When distributing the "borrowed" rice and money, the poor peasants "showed that they know how to unify and help each other."

However, the writer of the report pointed out what he saw as a few negative outcomes of the "forced lendings" on the poor peasants. First, especially in mountainous areas, poor peasants [involved in "forced lendings"] were initially reluctant and cautious, still deferring to the prestige of landlords, not yet daring to act boldly. Second, "a few [poor peasants] were fearful because of their connection with a landlord, not daring to participate; or, if they did participate, they would try to stand hidden, not wanting the landlord to see their face." Third, a few poor peasants, after successfully forcing the landlord to lend them money or rice, were afraid that, after the cadre had returned to the interzone branch, the landlord who had been targeted by the policy would carry out revenge. Fourth, there was concern about a number of poor peasants who, when carrying out the forced lending, "were so filled with hatred for the landlord that they wanted to beat or otherwise brutalize him and immediately resolve the issue of land and property that had been taken from them by the landlord." And finally, the writer of the report expressed concern for what sort of precedent 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'."

As for 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 they were. As for the "upper-middle peasants," the report explained as follows:

> 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 [của lớp trên], 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 [ăn hiếp] 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, making efforts 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 surrended 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." The report noted that a number or 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 for them 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 [cường hào]) 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, the basic idea was that it was all a part of typical landlord treachery. Thus apparently some landlords 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 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 people who had run out of food were forced to do. According to the report, others 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, on the whole, plausible, though one wonders about the quote, here and there, that appears to match up too well with the regime's propaganda. A report on the situation in Nam Định province 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 grateful peasant allegedly stated: "With the Party, the Government, and Chairman Hồ, we are definitely not afraid of starving to death." No doubt this is exactly what the Party leadership hoped poor peasants would think and say, but it seems too perfect to be true—an example of a socialist-realist element put into a report to reassure the Party leadership that their anti-famine policies were being implemented in Nam Định to good effect.

5. *Famine in Interzone 4*

Interzone 4 was comprised 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 Union command had left virtually this entire block of the country to the DRV. There had been some talk by the French earlier in the war about investing Thanh Hóa, the northernmost province in Interzone 4, but it had not happened. The interzone 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. Though the French did carry out some bombing of these provinces, it was probably not enough to be considered as fundamentally altering economic life in the region.

The reports on the famine situation in Interzone 4 contained in the file were all written in April of 1953, before Phạm Văn Đồng's May directive on the issue. This means that I will not be able to provide a 'before and after' perspective to see how the shift in perspective from the top impacted how people in the apparatus viewed (or at least, reported) what was happening at the local level. Generally, the hunger situation as indicated in the reports seems to have been similar in seriousness to the other parts of Vietnam. As an April 4, 1953 report on the situation in Thanh Hóa 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 a number of villages and communes belonging to the following districts: Nông Cống, Tĩnh Gia, Quảng Xương, Hậu Lộc, Hoàng Hoa, Nga Sơn." Below is a reproduction of the report's description of the situation in the two 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 commune has 8 families suffering from hunger.
> Tân Phúc has two families that have begun to beg.
> The village of Yên Dân in Trung Chính commune has 24 families that are truly suffering from hunger.
> Thặng Bình commune is the worst:
>
> - 65 families have to go without eating for 3 or 4 days. Their health has already started to deteriate (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 commune: 300 families are suffering from hunger, with 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 [lên nương] 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, Thanh Hóa, Nghệ An, Hà Tĩnh, and Quảng Trị, made reference to "feudal exploitation" as a significant factor contributing to the lack of food. Starting with Thanh Hóa, we will look at the reasons for famine put forward in the reports from each of the four provinces.

1) Thanh Hóa—reasons for famine:
    a. Objective reasons:
        i. Destroyed by the enemy air attacks Gia Hà, Thạch Tân (?), Yên Dân.
        ii. Enemy sweeps: Đ…(unreadable), Giáp Ngoại, Liên Sơn.
        iii. Enemy blockade by sea, hampering of local fishing (the coastal communes).
        iv. Lost harvest last year because of western wind, high salination water flooding (Tĩnh Gia, Nông Cống).
    b. Subjective reasons:
        i. 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.
            1. [Peasants] have contributed only a little in advanced tax payments, then they eat through [ăn tiêu] most of their rice and money. When the October harvest comes, they have to pay everything [at one time]. Or, if the October harvest agricultural tax is carried out slowly, they overspend on farming.
            2. Deviations in the mobilization of people's porters. Mobilization of people who are primarily laborers [thành phần lao động chủ yếu] without zealously helping their households with production.
            3. 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 report was that a "great many" of the hungry communes were occupied by people whose livelihood depended solely on rice farming since they had no supplemental source of work [phó nghiệp]. Many 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 in order to earn enough money for the purchase of food.

A Look at Three 'Hungry' Communes 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, he explained that the attached report dealt with the three struggling communes of Văn Hiền, 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 the vice-chairman of the Anh Sơn district Resistance Committee, Mr. Hoàng Trần Trực, directly to Văn Hiền and Hoa Lưu to investigate the situation. 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 three struggling communes. After investigating the situation in the respective communes, the report explained, Mr. Thi held a meeting with the commune's Resistance Committee and mass organizations (attended by cadres from each hamlet) in order to reach a

consensus on the hunger situation and how to address it. That meeting, apparently in Hoa Lưu, was also attended by the attaché recruited to inspect the situation in Nhân Mỹ.

The report provided brief, short-hand descriptions of the hunger situation in five villages of Văn Hiền commune and two villages of Hoa Lưu commune, which were considered to be "typical" [điển hình] of the situation throughout that commune. In light of the Party leadership's growing campaign to blame economic difficulties suffered by peasants on the landlord class, it is worth noting two things related to this issue. First of all, during the land reform, the Party leadership decided that mass mobilization teams would operate under the assumption that 5.68 percent of the total rural population belonged to the landlord class and that this percentage should be applied more or less consistently across all communities. As such it is worth noting that not a single family in any of these three communes 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 there were 130 families that lacked food. One assumes that this probably was some fraction of the total number of families in the village. Yet the report also indicated that the village had a total of two rich peasant families—less than two percent of the total population. The village of Văn Đông had 179 total families, five of which were labeled as rich peasants—less than three percent. The village of Văn Thơ had 140 total families, two of which qualified as rich peasants—less than two percent.

The point of this is not to argue that the earlier class demarcation was correct and the later one used during the land reform incorrect. What is more important is how a change in class demarcation standards could have contributed to thousands of people assuming, on the basis of the old standards, that they would not fit the qualification of landlord and thus not be targeted in the land reform.

The second issue is that in the descriptions of the famine situation in seven villages, only two negative comments about rich peasants appear. In the village of Văn Thái, there were two rich peasant families that, a month earlier, were reported to have each had four to five hundred kilograms of rice. One of them had apparently sold on credit [bán chịu] some corn to people in need and had the "trick" of lending peasants plates that they could sell 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.

Indeed, the relationship that appears to be of much greater concern to starving local peasants is that between themselves and the DRV state, especially with respect to the agricultural tax. The following descriptions give a sense for how much pressure there was on families to pay that agricultural tax. The cadre who wrote the report clearly did not dare state too strongly that the agricultural was a key cause of the hunger in these three communes. But, as we will see, he had subtle ways in his reporting of making this an unavoidable conclusion (for example, by letting it be known that many of the people who were suffering from hunger had paid their agricultural tax).

In the village of Vạn Thái in Văn Hiền commune, the report 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 labeled, "opinion among the people," the report stated that people had not been able to gather in time the amount of rice required by the government and thus had felt compelled to sell furniture and water buffalos in order to meet the requirement.

In the village of Văn Đồng, the report stated that only 22 of the 179 families in the community had been able to pay their agricultural tax, with all families that were hungry also being short on their tax. "Of the 165 families that were short on food, only three had been able to pay their agricultural tax, with the entire village still owing 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 harvest 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, out of the 188 total families in the village, "only 66 families had handed in their agricultural tax and that, of the 96 families who lacked food, the majority had paid their agricultural tax." It is also interesting to note the report's claim that "of the [villages'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)." As for the "aspirations" [nguyên vọng] of the people moving forward, the report listed four things. First, villagers "want the agricultural tax to be reduced." Second, they wanted to be able to borrow rice seed. Third, they want to borrow buffalos. And fourth, "poor and middle peasants want to be able to donate land." First of all, 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? This seemed to go against the whole theoretical foundation of the Party's land reform policy, which held that giving land to peasants would make them more enthusiastic support of the DRV regime.

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 the agricultural tax was so high that many peasants wanted to reduce their amount of land to ease the burden of this tax.

Eleven Hungry Families in Cấp Tiến Commune[163]

The above accounts of the famine have shown analysis of its causes at the national, interzone, provincial, district, communal, and hamlet levels. This next and final section will provide a description of eleven "hungry" families from a commune named Cấp Tiến in Phú Thọ province's Đoan Hùng district. The district was roughly 130 kilometers to the northwest of Hà Nội, nestled between Red River to its west and the Lô River running roughly parallel to its east.

[163] The commune is in Đoan Hùng district of Phú Thọ province.

The region was what the Vietnamese refer to as the midlands, meaning that it had a combination of normal wet rice fields in the valleys but also terraced rice fields in some of the many surrounding hills.

The report on Cấp Tiến commune was sent to Prime Minister's office by the minister of the interior, Phan Kế Toại. It appears that the report was put together by a group of local Party members and officials affiliated with Cấp Tiến commune. They had formed a "Famine Relief Committee" to address the situation in the commune's three struggling hamelts where, in early August of 1953, the group had conducted an investigation into the situation. They found that the hunger situation in their commune was not not as "critical" as it had been a few years earlier and that, with local cooperation, they could help those who were suffering survive until the October harvest. In a preview of what was to come in the report, this introductory explanation concluded with the line: "As for the issue of peasants in our hamlet having returned a lot of temporarily distributed land (2/5 [of the total]), our Branch is waiting for further investigations, and requests permission to report on that issue later."

The Party leaders were keen to assert control over all aspects of social, political, cultural, and economic life in the areas under their control and to promote their "people's regime" as more democratic and humane than the rival State of Vietnam regime based in Vietnam's French-controlled cities. Throughout the two decades before seizing power in 1945, the Party's slogans had always included such things as retirement pay, unemployment benefits, paid maternity leave for women, free childcare, etc. When they took power, however, and especially after the war began in earnest, the Party leaders were under no illusions about the possibility of creating such a benevolent state at any point in the near future. Every economic asset needed to be channeled into the war effort. From their point of view, one of the major concerns about famine work, in addition to the loss of precious rice desperately needed for the army, was the possibility that the people would start to become economically dependent on state handouts. Thus the report on Cấp Tiến commune carefully assures higher-ups that this crucial consideration had been borne in mind by the Famine Relief Committee. In describing the guidelines for providing aid, the report explains: "Only provide aid to those people who are no longer able to do anything, but avoid creating a mentality of reliance [upon government aid]." The report's description of the method of distributing famine aid gives it an almost conspiratorial flavor: "Stay calm—work, but say nothing."

The bulk of the report was devoted to exploring the reasons why the eleven hungry families that had been chosen for investigation had run out of food. As will be seen, the descriptions are extremely brief and crude. Nonetheless, they still convey some rich details about village life during a time of war. Cấp Tiến commune had a total population of only 1013 people, with 527 of Kinh ethnicity, 442 of Cao Lan [or Sán Chày] ethnicity, and 44 of Thổ [or Tài] enthnicity. With no tone marks on the archival documents, I cannot be certain of the correct spelling of the names in this report.

1. Name: Mr. Dai

   Ethnicity: Kinh
   Family situation: His wife died a month ago. Mr. Dai still has the strength to work and has a six-year-old child.

Source of livelihood: In 1951, he was given 1 hectare and 8 sao of temporary land from a French plantation. He initially farmed all of it. In 1952, he returned [some of this land], keeping 8 sào.
Reason for hunger:

a. At last year's October harvest, he brought in about 30 barrels worth, 15 of which he used to pay back debts. What was left [his family] ate until February when they ran out.
b. His wife was sick and then died.
c. This year has been harder than last.
d. He is afraid that if he plants a lot of rice he will have a large tax burden.

2. Name: Mr. Khôi

   Ethnicity: Cao Lan

   Family situation: Both he and his wife have the strength to work. They have two children under the age of five.
   Source of livelihood: Hill farming [làm nương] and weaving.

   Reason for hunger: He does not know how to plan for his work.

3. Name: Mr. Thôn

   Ethnicity: Cao Lan
   Family situation: He and his wife are over 60, they have a daughter who is 16 and suffers from epilepsy.
   Source of livelihood: Were given land but refused, farming in the hills instead.
   Reason for hunger:

   a. Wife is sick and bedridden.
   b. He is a little crazy—when he hears the sound of an airplane he jumps into a rock cave.

4. Name: Ms Phương

   Ethnicity: Cao Lan
   Family Situation: Ms Phương starved to death at the end of the lunar calendar's sixth month. She had two daughters, one of whom is married. The other is not yet married and is sick in bed. The son-in-law is currently away serving as a "people's porter."
   Source of livelihood: They farm about one hectare and 5 sào of land.
   Reason for hunger: After completing the October harvest, they paid their debts (don't remember how much) and ate the rice that they had left, which lasted until January.
   Last year, because of sickness, they could not do the May harvest rice crop.

5. Name: Mr. Kỳ

   Ethnicity: [unclear]
   Family situation: Mr. Kỹ is 50 years old and sick. He has a daughter who is away working as a people's porter. He has two sons under ten years of age.
   Source of Livelihood: He works land that was termporarily distributed to him—not sure how much.
   Reason for Hunger: Last October, after harvesting his crop, paying his agricultural tax, and paying his other debts, he soon ran out of food. He was able to eat thanks to the efforts of his oldest daughter, who did some small trading and got food for him. Last January, his oldest daughter went to work a stint as a people's porter. In June, she went to work another stint as a people's porter on her own volition, with the commune [leadership] accepting her without considering her family situation.

6. Name: Ms Đạc

   Ethnicity: Cao Lan

   Family Situation: Ms Đạc is over 70. Her oldest son lives on his own and is also poor. One grandson is in the army and another grandson (26 years old) and a granddaughter (18 years old) live at home with her. They all have the strength to work.

   Source of Livelihood: They had 1 hectare 4 sào of temporarily distribute land, but this year they returned it. Now they are farming in the hills again.

   Reason for Hunger:
   - Mr. Xuân, 26 years old, is a "backbone cadre" but has no plan for working. He likes to take his gun and go shooting more than make the effort to increase production.
   - This year he returned their [temporarily distributed] land. He sold his plow and bought another gun (he had one gun already) (both guns are rifles).
   - The hamlet has tried many times to educate him; he doesn't listen.

7. Name: Mr. Dau

   Ethnicity: Kinh
   Family Situation: Both he and his wife have the strength to work. He has one 18 year-old son who is weak with two small children.
   Source of Livelihood: He was given 2 hectares and 1 sào of temporarily distributed land. He returned some of that land and now works 1 hectare of temporarily distributed land and a little bit of land that was just cleared for farming.
   Reason for Hunger: Last October, after harvesting his crop he used 30 baskets of rice to pay off his debts, the remaining rice lasted until January. This year, in January, he went to work

as a “people’s porter,” meaning that he was not able to take care of his May harvest crop and was not able to plant manioc.

8. Name: Mr. Cầu

   Ethnicity: Kinh
   Family Situation: 1 elderly mother, a husband and wife, both of whom have the strength to work, but the wife just gave birth to two very small children. There is a sister who is 15 years old.
   Source of Livelihood: They have 5 sào of temporarily distributed land, and they recently cleared more land (nearly two hectares).
   Reason for Hunger: This year nobody will lend to them because people are afraid of “interest reduction.” After finishing with the October harvest last year, they paid off their debts with about 30 baskets of rice. The remaining food lasted them until February. This year it is very difficult to get a loan because of the fear of interest reduction.

9. Name: Mr. Thái

   Ethnicity: Cao Lan

   Family Situation: Lives with his elderly mother—he is a strong youth.

   Source of Livelihood: He is a very talented weaver and he farms in the hills

   Reason for Hunger: He frequently takes his gun to go shooting and one time he came across a beehive, from which he took 15 jars of honey and sold for 300,000 đồng [DRV dollars]. Since then he has been obsessed with finding more bees, no longer bothering to weave or farm. The hamlet (administration) had him carry out self-criticism. He accepted his shortcomings and has promised to get back to [normal] work.

10. Name: Mr. Giao

    Ethnicity: Kinh
    Family Situation: Just he and his wife, but he is disabled.
    Source of Livelihood: The husband is a weaver. His wife takes what he has woven and uses it to barter.
    Reason for Hunger: This year, few people buy woven goods. His wife has been sick, so she had not been able to bring his goods to sell at markets. And nobody will give them a loan.

Conclusion

What this chapter has attempted to show is that 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 or landlords 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 saw examples of peasants who had handed back to the local Party apparatus land that had been allocated to them. Other peasants (in Nghệ An) apparently wished to to 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 actually correlated to an increase in the peasants' disposable income, no doubt the land hunger claimed by the Party leaders in their justifications for the land reform would have rapidly materialized.

Though a greater sample-size is needed, the documents examined in the chapter also suggest just how shocking it must have been for many villages during the land reform to learn that (or to see that) roughly five percent of their community would be labeled as landlords. For example, as we saw, an earlier census had determined that the three communes in Nghệ An province (examined above) had nobody who qualified as a "landlord." It is likely that a large proporation of those in the countryside who were labeled as landlords during the land reform had been told or led to believe previously that they were only rich or middle peasants, perhaps leading them to assume that they would not be targeted as landlords during the campaign.

Chapter 3

Refining the Land Reform Policy: April-December 1953

After the decision had been made by Nguyễn Tất Thành in October 1952 to follow Stalin's advice and proceed with the land reform, the Party leadership waited for a few weeks and then cautiously began to prepare the theoretical groundwork for the coming campaign. For the first four months of 1953, they published a number of articles that focused on the justification for land reform and provided the basic outlines of the campaign. After April of 1953, the Party leaders began to circulate a large number of internal directives providing clarifications and adjustments to the land reform policy that were, for the most part, inspired by what had been learned in the early experimental waves of the campaign. In their press organs, they began to devote a number of different columns to issues related to mass mobilization. These newspaper columns were of an educational character and seem to have been targeted at potential land reform cadres in the state apparatus. To supplement what was printed in the newspapers, the Party leadership had tens of thousands of land reform pamphlets of various sizes printed for distribution. Some these pamphlets, which I was able to find in used-book stores in Hà Nội, are roughly the size of a box of cards—clearly intended to be carried by the land reform cadre in his pocket for easy reference in the field. The following chapter examines the various refinements and clarifications to the land reform policy made by the Party leadership over the roughly year-long period from April 1954 up to the battle of Điện Biên Phủ (May 7, 1954) and Sixth Meeting of the Central Committee held from July 15-17, just a few days before the official announcement of the Geneva Agreements on July 21.

The chapter begins with the VWP's promulgation of three key decrees related to the land reform. It then turns to the campaign's overall wave system and the three primary institutional units of the land reform apparatus on the ground: the special people's courts, the land reform brigades, and the land reform teams. This is followed by a look at the specific steps that the Party leaders devised for land reform brigades in general and for the cadres actually carrying out the campaign in selected rural communities. What emerges is a system of implementation that provided cadres with very little leeway for improvisation and which facilitated (through frequent meetings their immediate superiors in the apparatus) the quick identification of cadres who were fulfilling the requirements of the campaign at each carefully planned out stage. The final section of the chapter analyzes the VWP's approach toward propagandizing the land reform, including the release of the "Land Reform Law" [Luật Cải cách ruộng đất] approved by the National Assembly in December 1953.

When the Party leaders, along with their Chinese advisers, first began to plan the land reform campaign toward the end of 1952 and during the beginning of 1953, it was unclear how much longer the war against the French Union forces would continue. On the one hand, the DRV had improved considerably on the battlefield and, barring some significant miscalculation, was not in danger of suffering a catastrophic military defeat that would end the war in favor of their foes, the French and the non-communist State of Vietnam led by Bảo Đại. On the other hand, the French Union forces had made real progress in military recruitment. As early as April 1952, the DRV leaders were estimating that the State of Vietnam had already been able to recruit 80,000

Vietnamese soldiers.[164] The plan of the French leaders was to increasingly transfer fixed security duties (i.e. pacification) to Vietnamese soldiers recruited to fight for the State of Vietnam. This would then enable the French Union leaders to concentrate their better-trained and more experienced European soldiers for more aggressive mobile operations against the DRV strongholds.

Since the Party leaders maintained that land reform could only be carried out in areas that were under firm DRV control, the situation on the ground in early 1953 limited the scope of the campaign to a few regions in the North and Northwest of Tonkin and to most of Interzone 4 (Central Vietnam). There were still densely populated areas of the Red River delta that were either largely under French control or, more commonly, under DRV influence (in some cases described by the regime as "guerrilla areas" [vùng du kích]) but not the uncontested control considered to be a prerequisite for carrying out land reform. The Party leaders apparently felt that their control in the South was not strong enough to carry out land reform there, so that entire region was excluded from the Party's plans, despite its having by far the country's most concentrated land tenure situation.

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

As preparation for the land reform campaign, Nguyễn Tất Thành, playing the role of Hồ Chí Minh, the democratically elected (in the "bourgeois democratic" sense) president of the DRV state, signed three decrees (sắc lệnh) on May 12, 1953 that provided a certain legal foundation for the campaign. As with all DRV decrees, these three began with the lines, "In consideration of current needs and following the resolution of the Government Cabinet [Hội đồng Chính phủ] after coming to agreement with the National Assembly Standing Committee [Ban Thường trực Quốc hội]…" The idea was to make Hồ Chí Minh's decrees seem as though they had been written at the request of government bodies who had themselves, based on their own assessment of the situation on the ground (and after some meaningful discussion between the cabinet and the National Assembly Standing Committee) come on their own volition to the ideas expressed in the decrees. The Party leaders had the three decrees, along with an "edict" [nghị định] from the prime minister's office [thủ tướng phủ] about the implemention of the decrees, published in the May 21, 1953 issue of *The People*.[165] That was a special issue of the newspaper devoted to the mass mobilization.

Before looking at a few of the interesting aspects of these decrees, it is worth noting two basic things about them. The first is their strong retro-active character. One of the clauses of the decrees stated that all pre-existing land policy laws were to be considered null and void. This was crucial because, as we will see, the decrees sanctioned the punishment of people today for things done yesterday that had been legal according to yesterday's laws. A second general aspect of the decrees was their promotion of an analytical framework for viewing the countryside that focused entirely on the internal dynamic of a community (especially the relationship between elites and the local poor). What was completely absent from these decrees was mention of the new player in the game of extracting peasant resources, the DRV state, and whether any of the

[164] Hoàng Quốc Việt, "Những âm mưu chia rẽ và lôi kéo quần chúng của địch gần đây" [Recent Enemy Schemes to Divide and Win-over the Masses] (delivered at the 3rd Plenum of the Party Central Committee, April 22-28, 1952), *VKDTT 1952*, 132.

[165] Nhân dân, "Nhiệt liệt hoan nghênh những sắc lệnh mới về chính sách ruộng đất của Chính phủ" [Enthusiastically Welcome the Government's New Decrees on Land Policy], *Nhân dân* [The People], no. 113, May 21, 1953. The three decrees are printed on the third page of the newspaper.

new rules of the game were to be applied to it. For example, the decrees (ostensibly) gave local peasant associations considerable leeway in determining what the land rents would be for poor peasants. Would local peasants be given the same jurisdiction with respect to the agricultural tax? Landlords, in some cases, would be forced to pay retroactive back-taxes to those who had rented from them. Would the DRV state be compelled to pay peasants for all the rice it had extracted through "forced borrowing"? We saw in some of the reports on the famine that these were concerns held by some struggling peasants. But the Party leaders carefully controlled the form of the discourse on the countryside, creating a semantic template that was restricted to peasants versus landlords. No doubt the analytical template that the Party leaders feared, privately, was the one that looked beyond class and simply placed a local community on one side and the DRV state on the other.

Decree 149 on Land Policy

The first of the three decrees, "SL 149 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% from what they were before the August Revolution back in 1945 and that the landlords were not to demand in rent any more than one third of the harvest. As far as how low land rents could be reduced, there appears to have been virtually no limit. "In the case of rented land being of poor quality or hard to farm, requiring a lot of work, then the rent might need to be reduced by 50% or even more. This issue will be determined by the Peasant Association or through a peasant discussion session." Again, the reluctance of the Party leadership to establish a minimum land rent rate is apparent.

"Decree 149/SL on Land Policy" had some interesting clauses dealing with debt reduction. The first part listed all the circumstances which would lead to the complete abolition of a debt. Three of the four were reasonable, but probably not especially meaningful for peasants. All debts that had been accrued before 1945 were to be waived off. It is hard to imagine that by 1953, after the significant upheavals brought about by the eight years of war, there were many peasants who were actually worried about having to pay a debt from 1944 or earlier. Perhaps more applicable was the clause stating that a debter 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. Perhaps 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. Though I think it highly unlikely that many poor peasants were worried about having to pay off debts to local elites in 1953, for those who were in debt, Decree 149 provided a way out: denounce one's lender as being a Vietnamese traitor.

As had been the case with land rent rates, Decree 149 hedged on setting some sort of minimum interest rate for lending money that could have been applied across the board. "From now on, lending will be based on compromise between lender and borrower. It will follow the principle of borrowers paying back their loans and the lender earning interest. The Government is not going to set an interest rate, but it prohibits all dishonest schemes aimed at exploiting a borrower…" It is possible that the Party leadership worried that setting an interest rate would

serve the interests of the landlord class and seem to suggest that exploitation could be eliminated through reform rather than full-fledged social revolution.

A final noteworthy aspect of Decree 149 was its mention of a plan to establish "Land Committees" [Ban Ruộng đất] in order to "help the Government along with leaders at the interzone and provincial level to lead and push forward the implementation of this land decree…" This was obviously the blueprint for the later "Land Reform Committees" [Ủy ban Cải cách Ruộng đất], which would be officially formed in the beginning of 1954. At the Central Committee level, the "Land Reform Committee" was to be headed by the Prime Minister [Phạm Văn Đồng] and include the Minister of Agriculture, the Minister of the Interior, a representative of the Unified Vietnam front organization, and two representatives of the National Peasant Liaison Committee. There were to be corresponding "Land Reform Committees" at the interzone and provincial levels.

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

The mass mobilization 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 the decree explained, these courts were to be established as a temporary district-level (or inter-district) 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 commune to commune in areas undergoing mass mobilization, passing verdict 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 [xét xử] quickly." I have not yet been able to find out how many people typically worked on a Special People's Court, but even if its staff was considerable, the task of trying dozens, perhaps hundreds, of cases in a district undergoing mass mobilization must have been virtually impossible to do with any sort of thoroughness and certainty. The number of cases that would come to the court was potentially enormous. A typical district contained ten to fifteen communes, with each commune typically containing six to eight villages. The decree's stress on the Special People's Courts being able to churn out verdicts "quickly" is understandable. Indeed, it said that any "complicated and drawn-out cases involving counterrevolutionaries should be transferred to the normal People's Courts by the interzone Resistance Committee.

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:

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

One of the key goals of the mass mobilization was to create or strengthen the class consciousness of rural Vietnamese, to encourage them to see the world around them through the lens of class rather than family or village. One way of developing this class consciousness was to divide up a

community into classes and have each class be treated differently by the DRV state. If nothing else, during the mass mobilization, members of a community learned that it would be catastrophic for them to be classified as "landlords" and a very good thing to be classified as "poor peasants." The former might have the head of the family imprisoned or subjected to a humiliating public "struggle session," which could end with him (or her) being shot and the family losing its property, and being consigned to a pariah status in the village. The village family classified as poor peasant, on the other hand, would have, first and foremost, the joy and relief of not suffering the terrible fate of the family next door that had been labeled as landlord. The poor peasant family might also be chosen to receive some of the belongings confiscated from their neighbor accused of being a landlord. With stakes such as these, class demarcation was something worth fighting over.

Of the fourteen clauses in Decree 150 dealing with the Special People's Courts, the sixth was arguably the most ominous: "When questioning [a defendant], beating and torture must absolutely not be used." The fact that a government decree on the functioning of a government court would need to stress that defendents were not to be beaten and tortured suggests a great deal about the nature of that court. At the very least, it suggests that obtaining a confession was going to be a key goal and that there would be a great temptation to use torture if that confession was not forthcoming from a defendant.

The use of torture in the mass mobilization was common enough to raise serious questions about the good fairth of the Party leaders when they stated publicly and internally that torture was not to take place. On the other hand, they were clearly dead serious about the theatrical aspect of the campaign, how the mass mobilization, the public struggle sessions, etc., were supposed to look and sound to the members of a community. If the defendant were brought before the people for a struggle session with his face covered in blood, open wounds, etc. from having been beaten to elicit a confession, it was going to make the show a lot less convincing. That may have been a genuine concern of the Party leaders when they wrote their many statements outlawing torture. Another possible explanation is that they privately, among themselves, recognized that torture was going to be necessary to obtain confessions for the type of implausible crimes that the Party desired in the mass mobilization. However, to the public, and even to the Party rank and file, Nguyễn Tất Thành, Phạm Văn Đồng, and Trường Chinh could not appear to be advocates of torture. It could damage their reputation from a purely moralistic standpoint. But a failure to come out strongly against torture could also be interpreted by rank-and-file members as a sign that the Party leaders themselves were not confident in the general case they were making against the landlord class (that is, not confident that widespread landlord perfidy could be proved through the normal collection of evidence).

Decree 151: The Punishment of Landlords

The decree on the punishment of landlords contained fourteen clauses, which were divided roughly in half between descriptions of lighter crimes that would apparently draw punishments of three to ten years in prison and more serious crimes that could earn the landlord from ten years all the way up to life imprisonment and even execution.

The lighter crimes, for the most part, tended to include various actions that the landlord might take in an attempt 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." Landlords were also forbidden from slaughtering and eating their livestock, from spreading anti-Government 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 in order to carry out an uprising.
3. Beat and injure, beat to death, or assassinate the peasants, cadres, and government employees.
4. Commit arson against houses, supply stores, food, harvested crops, or irrigation systems.
5. Incite or lead a group of people to create 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 they 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." As for the average person in the village, the directive stated that he "had the right and the responsibility to denounce any person he knows to have committed one of the above crimes."

The mass mobilization campaign was initially conceived in 1953 as having two stages, a rent and loan interest reduction phase and then, a few months later, a land reform phase. In early 1955, the Party began to carry out a third phase, called "reexamination" [phúc tra], which had not been mentioned in the early explanations of the mass mobilization plan. Nevertheless, "reexamination" was a part of the CCP's land reform program, so it is almost certain that this third phase was in the original blueprint for the mass mobilization rather than something added 'on the fly.' According to the Party leadership's instructions, the rent reduction campaign was to be focused on implementing the DRV's older land policies and delivering an initial blow against the landlord class. The subsequent land reform phase would take things further, completely reversing the socio-economic hierarchy in the countryside through the destruction of the landlord class and the promotion of poor peasants.

Had Local Cadres Carried out the Party's Rural Policies?

As I have shown, there is compelling evidence that local cadres had, for the most part, implemented the Party's land policies. Most importantly, they had distributed a large quantity of communal land and land that had been confiscated from "Vietnamese traitors" and the French. Because of the enormous amount of food required to feed a large army and a growing bureaucracy, however, the Party leadership had no choice but to extract as much rice as possible out of the rural population under their control. This meant that local DRV authorities had to tax peasants heavily on the land distributed to them. The DRV state's extraction of rice from the

countryside started out as a voluntary contribution, then shifted toward requisition for a few harvests, and then moved to an official agricultural tax. As we saw, the Party leadership structured the agricultural tax so that it was a percentage not of what peasants actually produced but of what the Party leaders felt that they should produce on a plot of land if they worked hard enough.

This challenging tax system, which punished underproductivity, appears to have inspired many peasants to lower the amount of land that they farmed as a means of lowering their tax burden and avoiding indebtedness to the DRV state. In many cases, this dynamic combined with a multitude of other disruptions and challenges brought about by the war and the weather to lower steadily the amount of land farmed in DRV-controlled areas. We saw in the reports from the Vietnamese North interzone and from Nghệ An province the phenomenon of peasants who had been given land by the DRV state proceeding to then return that land back to local DRV authorities.

Where the local cadres can be seen as having failed, in the eyes of the Party leadership, was in inspiring local peasants to see their world through a completely different lens, to see that Vietnam was engaged in an epic struggle to end colonialism and gain independence, meaning that a reordering of life's priorities was appropriate. The Party leaders no doubt wanted local cadres to inspire their communities to embrace enthusiastically the enormous sacrifices that winning the war required of them. And they wanted local cadres to harness and maintain indefinitely that initial surge of voluntaristic spirit that had been prevalent in the country during the first months after the August Revolution. In my opinion, the top Party leadership, behind closed doors, understood all too well that there was plenty of land managed by the DRV state for poor peasants to farm and that the enormous quantities of land left fallow by peasants in the countryside did not support the image of landlord exploitation during the war.

Nevertheless, the narrative of landlord exploitation was essential to the Party leaders, connected as it was with class struggle, the driver of history. There was already a path to socialism that had been pioneered by the Soviet Union and, more recently, by the PRC. That path was a process, with one set phase leading into the next. Part of that process involved infusing poor peasants with a sense of class consciousness and channeling that consciousness into attacks against local elites. This event had been in the Party's program since the late 1920s. Though the extraordinary conditions of the war had altered the situation in the countryside, especially in those regions controlled by the DRV, the experience of rising up against local elites had to occur, regardless.

One of the first of many Party directives on the land reform was written by Trường Chinh on April 24, 1953. Titled, "On Mass Mobilization in 1953," the directive gave a general overview of the first phase of the mass mobilization, the rent reduction. This was to be the "central task" of the Party for 1953 and the Party general secretary stressed that all branches of the government, where possible, should try to coordinate their work with the mass mobilization. As the campaign began to expand, he explained, Party leaders would need to "set aside a number of cadres who could be worked gradually into the mass mobilization brigades."

> The *goal* of mass mobilization is this: overthrow the reactionary influence and weaken the feudal economic influence. Crush the feudal political influence and partially [một phần] satisfy the economic needs of the peasantry. Seize [giành] political advantage for the laboring peasants in the countryside. Consolidate the worker-peasant alliance, consolidate and expand

> the Unified People's Front. Develop production, push the resistance war forward, and prepare the conditions for land reform.[166]

With respect to the "content" of that first part of mass mobilization, we can see that its focus was on implementing the Party's policies that had been in place for the past few years.

> The *content* of the mass mobilization is the following: Organize and educate the working peasants. Unify the majority of them and then lead them in a struggle to overthrow Vietnamese traitors, reactionaries, and cruel despots. Completely reduce land rents (and even have landlords compensate peasants retroactively for rent in years past [thoái tô]), and implement loan interest reduction. Distribute completely the land of the French colonialists, that of the Vietnamese traitors and reactionaries, and communal lands for peasants who have no land or very little. [The campaign] will also aim at putting into appropriate use those lands whose owners are absent… However, *the main thing is the complete reduction of land rents*. [On the organizational front, the campaign will see to] reorganization and consolidation of the local party cell, of the peasant association, and of the local government administration (including the Resistance Committee, the People's Committee, the people's militia, and the commune public security apparatus).[167]

It is important to note that, even in the Party's description of the tasks to be carried out in the mass mobilization through the rent reduction campaign, there appears information that contradicts the narrative of peasant suffering as caused primarily by steep land rents. In the passage above, we see four different possible sources of available land for rent or use by peasants that would have enabled them to avoid renting from local elites.

The Basic Tasks of Land Reform Cadres

In his long report on the mass mobilization campaign delivered at the Party's 4th Plenum in January 1953, Trường Chinh had described the tasks of cadres recruited to serve the campaign in general terms. Upon entering their assigned village, mass mobilization cadres were to:

> Use appropriate slogans that are based on the immediate and earnest desires of the majority of the masses in a locality.
>
> 1. Patiently educate and organize the masses, making them come to consciousness on their own and voluntarily carry out struggle. Cadres absolutely may not carry out the struggle in place of the masses [làm thay], must not do the masses favors, and must also not simply command them [dùng mệnh lệnh].
> 2. Cadres must find and organize *loyal* elements from the poor peasant class to serve as backbone cadres, helping the Party to lead the campaign [at the local level].
> 3. Mobilize the peasant masses, *both men and women*, and build a strong peasant association to serve as the core of the movement.[168]

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[166] Trường Chinh, "Chỉ thị của Ban Chấp hành Trung ương, 24/4/1953: Về phát động quần chúng trong năm 1953" [Directive of the Executive, 24/4/1953: Mass Mobilization during 1953], *VKDTT 1953*, 175.
[167] Ibid.
[168] Trường Chinh, "Report at 4th Plenum of Central Executive, 25/1/1953," *VKDTT 1953*, 71.

What were the "immediate and earnest desires" of poor peasants in the countryside? There was little indication from the internal reports about the condition in the countryside that landlord rent rates would have been high on a real list of peasant grievances at that time. In terms of educating the masses, what was meant by "patiently"? How long would it take cadres to achieve the educational goals set out in the policy? Did the requirement that the peasants carry out the struggle "voluntarily" mean that rural communities ultimately had the final say over whether they carried out the attack on the landlord class?

With respect to the treatment of landlords during the rent reduction phase of the mass mobilization, Trường Chinh stressed that cadres were to "differentiate" between large, medium, and small landlords, and between those landlords who "followed the law" and those who did not. As for Vietnamese traitors, reactionaries, and cruel despots, they were to be "resolutely overthrown." Chinh explained that there were "a number" of cruel and despotic rich peasants who were hated by the peasants, but that "right now, in the mass mobilization for for the implementation of the land policy, the struggle of the masses needs to be focused on the landlord class, and within that class, on the cruel and reactionary ones; we should not have the scope of the struggle be too broad."[169] The use of the time qualifier "right now" for the "scope" of the mass mobilization through rent reduction hinted at the plan for a more comprehensive approach to the attack on local elites in the subsequent land reform phase of the movement.

Though ultimately the signals about what was to happen in the later land reform phase of the mass mobilization were ambiguous, Trường Chinh's initial internal explanation of the rent reduction phase of the mass mobilization stated that landlords whose "crime" had been not following the law could be dealt with by the "special people's court" and did not necessarily need to be made the target of a struggle session.

> Mainly, it is the large landlords, the ringleaders, and the pugnacious [hung hăng] ones that should be made the target of a struggle session. If this group is crushed, then the other landlords will not dare to resist stubbornly. As such, there are landlords who do not need to be struggled against. We do this mainly to sow divisions among the landlord class.[170]

Thus it was not clear from this policy statement what the fate of these second-rank landlords would be during the later land reform phase.

The Mass Mobilization from an Institutional Perspective: Courts, Brigades, Teams:

The Party leadership organized the mass mobilization apparatus in a military fashion, which was perhaps appropriate considering their official view of the campaign as a type of war against the landlord class in the countryside. The primary unit of the campaign was the "mass mobilization through rent reduction/land reform brigade" [đoàn], which was comprised of anywhere from fifteen to thirty mass mobilization "teams" [đội] or "work teams" [đội công tác] of roughly ten cadres. Generally speaking, a mass mobilization team would be assigned to one commune, with team members divided up among the various villages or hamlets that comprised that commune.

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[169] Trường Chinh, "Executive Directive, 24/4/1953: Mass Mobilization during 1953," *VKDTT 1953*, 186.
[170] Ibid, 186.

Mass mobilization through rent reduction was originally conceived of as a process that would take about three months. Later, as we will see, it would be shrunk down to two months. The Party leaders broke the basic tasks of a mass mobilization cadre in his hamlet into five steps, with a certain number of days devoted to each. It was the job of the team leader to check on the progress of each of the cadres under his command as they worked through the five basic steps of their task. This checking was done through frequent team meetings where members would be required to report to the team on how things were progressing. At least after each of the five steps in the mass mobilation, the team leaders would meet with their superior, the brigade leader, to provide an update on how things were progressing in their respective communes. According to discussions of the campaign that I had with former cadres, it was common for the brigade to have a small attachment of Chinese advisers, who would monitor the information collected by the brigade leader and, one assumes, report on the progress of the brigade to La Quý Ba, the head of the Chinese advisory mission in the DRV.

The mass mobilization brigade leader would send frequent reports to the Party leadership about how things were progressing at the local level. In his many articles about the mass mobilization, Nguyễn Tất Thành referred to things that happened in specific villages, suggesting that he and the other top Party leaders (Trường Chinh, Phạm Văn Đồng, Hoàng Quốc Việt, Lê Văn Lương, etc.) were able to follow the campaign closely. Obviously, the mass mobilization brigade leader, who was the key link between the Party leadership and what was happening on the ground, would have been hand-picked by the Party politburo for this important duty.

What was the position of the mass mobilization brigades vis-à-vis the existing Party structure in the region undergoing the campaign? As Trường Chinh explained, the two brigades currently at work in the Vietnamese North and in Thanh Hóa carrying out the experimental waves of rent reduction were under the direct leadership of the Central Committee (i.e. the Politburo). The mass mobilization brigades should "make direct contact with" the Interzone-level Party leadership in these two regions, but were not officially under the command of these interzone leaders. As for the mass mobilization teams, they were to "make direct contact with" the provincial level Party leaders but were under the "direct leadership" of the mass mobilization brigade leader. With respect to policies and directives for these two experimental waves of mass mobilization, the Central Committee was to "give direct orders" to the brigade leaders, who would then transfer them in the form of "direct orders" for the mass mobilization teams.

In the case of disagreement between the mass mobilization apparatus and the interzone or provincial apparatus, it was all too clear where the power lay:

> While carrying out work, if there are differences of opinion between the mass mobilization brigade leadership and the interzone leadership, the idea of the brigade should be followed, but the brigade must report [this disagreement] to the Central Committee. If there are differences of opinion between mass mobilization teams and the provincial leadership, the will of the team takes precedence, but the team must report this disagreement to the brigade leadership.[171]

From the perspective of the Interzone Party leadership, it must have been at least somewhat irritating to have one's power trumped in one's own backyard by this new arm of the top Party

[171] Trường Chinh, "Chỉ thị của Bộ Chính trị, 10/6/1953: Hướng dẫn các đoàn ủy, liên khu ủy về công tác phát động quần chúng" [Politburo Directive, 10/6/1953: Guidance for Brigade Leaders and Interzone Leaders on Mass Mobilization Work], *VKDTT 1953*, 230.

leadership. On the other hand, though, the Interzone Party leaders must have been well aware that mass mobilization brigade leaders were hand-picked by the top Party leaders for this important position. They were heavyweights who had close personal relationships with members of the Politburo. And their power would have been reinforced by the presence of CCP advisers. In my opinion, it was most likely the provincial Party leaders who would have felt the strongest pangs of uneasiness, being outranked in their own province by mass mobilization team leaders. Essentially, the provincial Party leader did not have the authority to determine the fate of members of his own apparatus.

"Focal Points" and "Secondary Points"

It was a common tactic of the Party leadership in a wide variety of different areas to channel energy into creating an exemplary version of something and then promoting that version as a source of inspiration and a model for others to follow. The way that a mass mobilization brigade was positioned in a region chosen for mass mobilization followed this same principle. The positioning of a mass mobilization brigade was supposed to be determined primarily by the corresponding interzone Party leadership.

> First and foremost, *careful preparations must be made*. Choose a few exemplary communes to use as *testing points* [thi điểm]. Concentrate the mass mobilization cadres on those communes and carry out work to gain experience, to give the cadres training. Then march forward and expand the movement. The exemplary communes chosen as testing points must be places where landlords and peasants have deep contradictions, where road access is relatively convenient, where the people are relatively densely populated, and where the mass base is relatively strong.
>
> Neighboring districts and communes need to nominate cadres to travel to the exemplary test-communes to study [what happens] and gain experience.[172]

Apparently while these tests were being carried out and to some extent based on the results gained from them, the interzone leadership were to divide the interzone into coherent regions so that after the testing points had been completed, the movement could then be expanded in successive waves to tackle the delineated regions. Again, the method of exemplary points was to be used as a launching mechanism for the movement.

> In every one of the [delineated] regions, now choose a number of communes that shall serve as *focal points*. Have the cadres in nearby communes participate [in the mobilization that takes place in the "focal points"]. The communes surrounding the "focal points" shall be called *secondary points*. In the focal point communes, the mass mobilization movement will take one step ahead. Afterwards, the movement will spread to the secondary communes, which will work closely together with the focal point communes.
>
> In every wave of work, Party leaders at the interzone, province, and district level must directly lead the mobilization in one or two ememplary communes, from which experience they will draw lessons in order to lead the general movement.
>
> [The leaders of the campaign] must avoid the tendency to work in a thunderous rush [ào ạt] instead of one step at a time, using the focal point [method]. But they must also avoid the

[172] Trường Chinh, "Executive Directive, 24/4/1953: Mass Mobilization during 1953," *VKDTT 1953*, 177.

> tendency to restrict the movement to a number of focal points, not daring to expand it outward.[173]

The Fives Steps of Mass Mobilization at the Village Level

Toward September 1953, looking upon what had happened with the experimental wave of the mass mobilization held from April to June of that year, and then the first official wave of the campaign, which had started in July and was near completion, the Party leaders showed continued concern about the results of the campaign. They seem to have been taken aback somewhat by the violence and chaos brought about the campaign in the experimental wave. There had been some early signs of concern on this front. A directive from May 4, 1953, in the middle of the experimental wave, had broke from normal practice, making an extremely rare reference to the level of killing that was to take place in the mass mobilization through rent reduction. In that May 4 directive, Trường Chinh had stated that, "according to the current situation, the ratio of death sentences shall be fixed in principle at 1 per every 1000 people in the free zone."[174] It is unclear whether, at the time when this ratio was released (right in the middle of the experimental wave), it was intended to spur cadres on to more executions than they were already doing or whether it was intended to 'reel them in' to some extent.

A resolution produced three months later, after a meeting of the Politburo held on the 8th and 9th of August, suggests concern about the results of the experimental wave of rent reduction. The politburo resolution had announced a small, but important, change in the official slogan of the mass mobilization. The phrase "neutralize the rich peasants" was changed to "ally with the rich peasants," a sign that the Party leaders believed that the "scope" [diện đấu] of the mass mobilization's attack was too large. As the resolution explained:

> What we are working toward is the land reform, of course not just the rent reduction. We need to focus on organizing and educating the peasants to prepare the conditions for a rapid move to land reform. *As such, the demands of the struggle at this moment should not be too high. And the way of carrying out the struggle should not be too disruptive* [phiền phức]*, and the time of mobilization should not be too long*.[175]

It seems to have been apparent to the Party leaders that the disruption brought about by the rent reduction campaign (and concerns about it held by elites who had heard rumors of what transpired) actually damaged agricultural production rather than boosted it as their theories had inspired them to dream. The attack on lenders no doubt made it increasingly difficult for peasants to obtain badly needed loans to tide them through September, that typically difficult month when the rice from the May harvest had already been depleted and the October harvest was still a few weeks away. In explaining the policy shift, the Politburo resolution placed considerable stress on economic reasons for easing off and doing more to reassure rich peasants:

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[173] Ibid.

[174] Politburo, "Chỉ thị của Bộ Chính trị, 4/5/1953: Về mấy vấn đề đặc biệt trong phát động quần chúng" [Politburo Directive, 4/5/1953: A Few Special Issues Related to the Mass Mobilization], *VKDTT 1953*, 201.

[175] "Nghị quyết của Hội nghị Bộ Chính trị, 8-9/8/1953: Về chỉnh đốn công tác phát động quần chúng" [Politburo Meeting Resolution, 8-9/8/1953: Adjusting Mass Mobilization Work], *VKDTT 1953*, 279.

> Because of the goal of isolating the landlords and concentrating our forces on overthrowing the feudalist power,
>
> Because of the need for unity in the countryside, the need to push forward production and the resistance war,
>
> Because of the need to exploit the advantages of the rich peasant economy to increase production,
>
> And because of the need to calm the nerves of middle peasants so that they may push hard to develop production,
>
> We have now abandoned the slogan 'neutralize the rich peasant' and replaced it with the slogan *ally with the rich peasant*.[176]

Similarly, the Party leaders decided to abandon the loan interest reduction and the retroactive element of the loan interest repayment as too complicated and too likely to ensnare rich and even middle peasants.

In a directive released by Trường Chinh on September 7, the Party general secretary gave a more detailed account of the five steps of mass mobilization and even provided the number of days each step should require. If the mass mobilization cadres would just understand the policies more clearly and follow the explicit directions (to the day) of the Party leadership, more satisfying results would surely be forthcoming. The following is a condensed version of the document (as it appears in the *Party Documents* series) with discussion of a few details that seem to be especially significant.

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

Propagandize: Upon entering his assigned village, the mass mobilization 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 at a later date. Also at these initial village meetings, the cadre was to announce "regulations" for the punishment of landlords who did not follow the law. This initial propaganda was also to make clear that 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" [ổn định] the landlord class, the cadre was to announce that different types of landlords would be treated differently.

Educate: The primary target of a mass mobilization cadre's political education in this first step was the local Party cell. The cadre was to start out by teaching members of the cell about the government's land policy and their responsibility during the mass mobilization process. After this, the cadre should have members of the cell carry out self-criticism with respect to their implementation, past and present, of the Party and government's policies. After this initial instruction and self-criticism, the cadre was to expel from the cell those who had committed "big mistakes." For the rest, the cadre was to either send them out to investigate the "landlord situation" in the community or take charge over monitoring the activities of "village bullies" [cường hào] so that, in the case of any trouble, the mass mobilization team could be notified in time.

[176] Ibid, 282.

Strike Roots: The third task of the mass mobilization cadre during the first step was to find one or two enthusiastic "roots" [rễ], which meant members of the poor peasant class who could form the basis of a core group of "backbone" [cốt cán] elements to lead the attack on the landlord class. "First and foremost, find one or two good people and carry out a preliminary [sơ bộ] mobilization of their thinking. After that, have them introduce or make contact with those people whom they consider to be the best. The cadres should then divide up and investigate these new people, training [bồi dưỡng] them (and, if necessary and possible, surveying the masses to find out what they think [of these recruits]). This method yields correct results and is also quick. In every commune, find 15 to 20 people."[177]

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

As the Politburo directive explained, after roots had been found, they were to be brought to the "focal point commune" [xã trọng điểm] where they could observe what went on there and study further the policies and goals of the mobilization. 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 study sessions were to involve "speak bitterness" sessions as a means to further "raise the class consciousness" [nâng cao giác ngộ] of the local recruits and for the mass mobilization cadres to learn more about them and the "landlord situation" in a local community.

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 commune. They were to determine which landlords were to become targets of struggle and which were to be sent to the provincial authorities for study. "The mass mobilization team needs to verify and grasp the list of struggle targets (in each commune, there should be from 1 to 3 people, except especially populous communes 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."[178]

It appears that this second step was the one during which the fate of local landlords was determined. The intention of the Party leadership was for public struggle sessions against "cruel and despotic landlords" to end with the landlord's execution by firing squad. A person accused of being a "landlord" and placed on the "list of struggle targets" was a person in the gravest of danger, with his or her fate probably already having been sealed. This brings up a few different questions. First, what was the actual role of the Special People's Court? It appears that its job was simply to put an official legal stamp of approval on decisions made by members of the mass mobilization brigade leadership, who oversaw the putting together of the landlord lists during the second step of the campaign. Another interesting question is why such an effort was made to compile the lists in a group setting, all in one place. A possible explanation is that the brigade

[177] Trường Chinh, "Chỉ thị của Bộ Chính trị, 7/9/1953: Về bước tiến, phương pháp và yêu cầu cụ thể trong phát động quần chúng giảm tô" [Politburo Directive, 7/9/1953: The Steps, Methods, and Concrete Demands during the Mass Mobilization for Rent Reduction], *VKDTT 1953*, 324.

[178] Thus it appears from the numbers put forward in the directive that the Party leaders wanted the executions reduced to about 1 per every 2000 people, down from 1 per every 1000 mentioned in the directive from May 5 of that year.

leaders had certain quotas or ratios about how many landlords were to be imprisoned and how many executed during a particular wave and in a particular zone. By drawing up these lists in one place under the supervision of the brigade leaders, they could more easily tally up the numbers and make adjustments so that those pre-set ratios were more or less met.

The early composition of these landlord target lists also might help to explain why the use of torture was so ubiquitous during the mass mobilization. It is hard to believe that cadres who had been in a village for only ten to fifteen days had had the time to gather adequate evidence to make a convincing case for why a landlord should be imprisoned or executed. The cadre and brigade leaders who made up the lists were basically dependent on the word of a person (the "root") whom they had known for only a few days. It is difficult to believe that these recruits came to the study session at the "focal point commune" armed with solid evidence about alleged landlord crimes. After the meeting, it may been incumbent upon the cadre, upon returning to his assigned community, to gather the evidence needed to make the case for what had been decided back at the meeting. If solid evidence was lacking and precious time continuing to run out, a confession from the accused would have been a possible way out…

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

> After the roots have returned to their communes, the district-level Party Committee will, basing itself on the list of struggle targets that was determined at the meeting, notify [thông tri] the Commune Party Committee to announce the surveillance [quản chế] 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 has the advantage of reducing the concerns of the masses and reducing the incidence of suicide or sabotage. It also helps to avoid having the scope of the struggle broaden while the masses are being mobilized.[179]

It was during this third step (still only ten days) that the mass mobilization cadre was to make more contacts with poor peasants, give them training in how to carry out "speak bitterness" sessions, and then send them throughout the entire community organizing "speak bitterness" sessions, using this forum to gain adherents. These local 'recruitment tours' were to focus on poor peasants but also welcome aboard middle peasants when appropriate. When 20 percent of the local population had been recruited in this "speak bitterness" movement, the mass mobilization was to announce the establishment of a new Peasant Association comprised of these adherents. "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.

While all this was happening, the mass mobilization cadre was also responsible for "reorganizing" the local Party cell. There were specific steps to be taken in handling this reorganization, which I will cover shortly. Generally speaking, though, this aspect of the cadre's job required purging the sell of "bad elements," having members carry out self-criticism,

[179] Ibid, 326.

appointing a new cell executive [chi ủy] composed primarily of poor peasants, and preparing the new cell for its responsibilities in the carrying out the mass mobilization.

What was to happen to the "second and third rank cruel despotic landlords" who had been sent to away to the province Party leadership for study? The directive explained that the province-level Resistance Committee needed to "clearly point out their feudal crimes of oppression and exploiting, explain the policy to them, and state clearly the principle on which the Government shall deal with them: only if they sincerely bow their heads and admit their crimes will they avoid being put before the peasants as a target of struggle. After that, force them to carry out a self-criticism, to analyze it, and then to promise that they will implement the policies." It is clear from these specific instructions and from the directive in general how obsessed the Party leaders were with having landlords confess to acts of sabotage and exploitation that would firmly pin on themselves responsibility for the hardships in the countryside.[180]

Indeed, the directive went on to command the Provincial Resistance Committee to "make a tally [thống kê] of truths about the landlords' crimes and then send it back to the commune so that it can be compared with the peasants' speak bitterness documents…" The mass mobilization cadre was supposed to check to see if there were any 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.[181]

4. Step Four (10-15 days): "Overthrow the cruel despots, redistribute the landlord's belongings obtained through struggle."

In the fourth step, roughly twenty to twenty-five days after first entering the village, the cadre had to organize the struggle session or sessions [cuộc đấu]. Sharing some characteristics of a staged show, the struggle session required the cadre to act not unlike a theatre director. As the directive explained, "thorough preparations" had to be made for this crucial event. These included "prepping the victims" [bồi dưỡng khổ chủ] so that they could deliver convincing public denunciations, collecting documents on the "crimes" of the landlords who were to be struggled against, 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."[182]

Once the struggle session had begun, it was crucial that it be "victorious." As the directive 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

[180] Ibid, 328.
[181] Ibid, 327-328.
[182] Ibid, 328-330.

carrying out the struggle session, only arguments and the law should be used—the use of torture and beating is strictly forbidden."[183]

Were the Party leaders against the use of torture on principle? Nguyễn Tất Thành, in the role of democratically elected DRV president, Hồ Chí Minh, publicly denounced torture as a "barbaric tactic practiced by the imperialists and colonialists." I suspect that he and the other Party leaders, in reality, saw the use of torture, like political assassination, as a harsh but normal reality of making revolution. Many of the Party leaders had suffered from some sort of torture in the colonial prison system, and they may have felt that it was perfectly acceptable and natural to use that "barbaric practice" against their enemies as it had been used against them. "Revenge" and "hatred" [căm thù] were driving themes of the mass mobilization. The frequent announcements forbidding the use of beating and torture, particularly during the struggle session itself (as we saw above), have a certain logic to them from a theatrical standpoint. Allowing the landlord to be beaten (not just slapped) during his or her public denunciation, to the point that bleeding cuts were opened up on his face or to the point of losing consciousness, might cause the audience to lose focus on the crucial narrative of the mass mobilization acted out through the denunciations.

Another important clarification that Trường Chinh made about the struggle sessions was that they were to be limited to the targets who had been 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 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 [kết hợp] with the struggle sessions, trying the cases in a timely [kịp thời] fashion." That was the only sentence in the entire directive about how this "special" court was supposed 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 some sort of disagreement occurred between the two sides. The ability to judge cases "rapidly" [nhanh chống] so as not to slow down the remarkable speed of the mass mobilization process seems to have been the most valued quality of the court.[184]

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 [thoái tô], and the reduction of debts." This was also the time to confiscate the land and property of "French imperialists, Vietnamese traitors, reactionaries, and of 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.

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[183] Ibid.
[184] Ibid.

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." Changing his tune again, Trường 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 "victims" [khổ chủ] who had done the lion's share of the denouncing during the struggle session. As such, they were to receive (a perhaps disappointing) ten to twenty percent of the goods obtained from the struggle target denounced by them.[185]

5. Step Five: "Reorganize local Party cell, educate the masses, and divide up the commune."

The primary task of this final step was the "reorganization" [chỉnh đốn] of the local Party cell, which will be covered presently. For the most part, this reorganization was to involve the expulsion of "landlords" from the Party, but it is interesting to note that 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. For "young intellectual" Party members who were the offspring of landlords and wanted to "improve themselves," they 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. One can imagine how many of them felt as they tried to show that they were against the landlord class and loyal to the Party.

Another secondary task of the mass mobilization was the partitioning of the commune. It might be split into two communes, with a new name given to one or both parts, or hamlets that had originally been a part of one commune might be cut off and joined together with nearby hamlets that had belonged to a different commune. 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.[186]

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."[187]

<u>The Party Reorganization during Mass Mobilization</u>

In addition to giving poor peasants the land, house, farm tools, and personal belongings confiscated from members of the community accused of being landlords, the Party leadership

[185] Ibid.
[186] Ibid, 331.
[187] Ibid, 332.

also intended to reward these beneficiaries of the land reform with positions within their local administrations. The VWP leaders hoped that if the poor peasant majority saw members of their own class filling out local government positions, they would see the DRV state as now "belonging to them." To make these new hirings possible, space would have to be cleared from within the existing bodies of local government. This clearing of space (that is, the purging of the local apparatus of alleged "bad elements") would, in addition to opening up room for new members, enable the Party leaders to 'wash their hands' of responsibility for negative phenomena carried out by the local revolutionary government since the August Revolution. This process of purging and hiring was called "reorganization," and its main focus was on that most powerful political organization in a community, the local Party cell.

The VWP leaders had been dissatisfied with the performance of local Party members since the earliest days of the war. That dissatisfaction and frustration had had a number of years to simmer and grow. Now the time for punishment had come. Forty year-old Lê Văn Lương was the Party leader put in charge of the Party reorganization. Writing in November 1953, he explained the basic goal of the Party cell reorganization in the rent reduction phase of the mass mobilization movement: "[D]uring the mass mobilization for rent reduction, we want to give the Party's base a preliminary cleaning so that it is pure enough and solid enough to help the mass mobilization be victorious and also to pave the way for land reform in the coming time."[188]

On the ideological front, Lê Văn Lương stressed the basic goals of the rectification, "distinguishing the boundary between us and the enemy," but added the "internal" goal of instilling in local Party members a "preliminary consciousness" about their responsibility to the Party and the masses. This was, of course, in line with the greater narrative of the Party leadership, which placed the blame for the difficult situation in the countryside on the "irresponsible" implementers of the policies rather than the policies themselves. Expressed differently, the Party leaders and the peasant masses shared the same interests and were both blameless. What should have been a harmonious relationship between these two had not entirely come to pass as a result of the bungling of self-serving Party members in the middle.

On the organization front, Lê Văn Lương explained:

> With respect to *organization*, we want to delineate the boundary between ourselves and the enemy. We want to purge from the Party Vietnamese traitors, reactionaries, cruel despots, landlords, and those rich peasant elements who have committed political crimes or who have sabotaged the mass mobilization and the policies of the Party and Government. We want to make Party cells relatively [tương đối] pure and relatively solid; we want to improve the relationship between the Party and the masses.[189]

An overriding theme of the mass mobilization was the categorization of society and institutions in a manner that would affirm the values of the Party leadership. The reorganization of Party cells followed this same tendency, with Lê Văn Lương instructing mass mobilization cadres to classify the local Party cell into one of three possible types. The first type was considered to be "basically good," which meant that a majority of the members of its leading office and in the cell as a whole "belonged to a good class" and that it had correctly implemented

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[188] Lê Văn Lương, "Chỉ thị của Ban Bí thư, 10/11/1953: Về chỉnh đốn chi bộ nông thôn trong phát động quần chúng" [Secretariat Directive, 10/11/1953: Reorganizing the Rural Party Cells during the Mass Mobilization], *VKDTT 1953*, 357.
[189] Ibid, 356.

the Party's policies and committed no major mistakes in its general conduct [tác phong]. In the "basically good" Party cell, there might be a few "bad elements," but they did not 'hold the reigns' of the cell. This first type of Party cell could be relied upon to mobilize the masses. The second was one where the leadership, in its class background, political standpoint, and ideology, was "either completely or partially under the thumb of cruel despotic landlords." In this type of Party cell, the majority of the members were good, but there was a "bad part" to the cell:

> With this type of Party cell, the mobilization of the masses to speak bitterness should be used to find a number of good Party members who come from a basic class background. These good party members should be supported and trained so that they may become backbone leaders. The mass mobilization cadre should appoint [chỉ định] a new provisional Party cell executive [chi ủy lâm thời] with the bad elements who are hindering the mass mobilization purged from its ranks. After having appointed a new provisional Party cell executive, the mass mobilization cadre needs to pay attention to guiding and helping it so that that new executive can be used as a basis for expanding the mobilization movement.[190]

The third and final type of Party cell was "basically bad." This meant that "the majority of the party members as well as the cell executive are landlords, cruel despots, or are people in the employ of landlords and cruel despots." This type of Party cell might have a few good members, but they had "little influence." A cell of this third type would need to be "disbanded" [giải tán] by the mass mobilization cadre. Whatever good elements existed in the cell were to be educated and supported so that they would become the "backbone" members of a newly formed Party cell.

What sort of punishments should be metted out to the "bad elements" of local Party cells? Once again, the "crimes" were listed carefully according to five basic types. (1) Internal spies working for the enemy (2) Elements who had surrendered to the enemy and been "lured" by him into becoming a "saboteur of the revolution…" (3) Party members who had participated in "reactionary organizations (or religious or otherwise superstitious organizations)" leading them to "sabotage the revolution and hurt the people…" (4) "Generally speaking," Party members from the exploitative class were to be purged, with the exception of special cases when the Party member had clearly rid himself of his old class standpoint. (5) "Those party members who have broken the law, who have been undisciplined, who have created heavy losses for the State and the people, and who are hated by the people, are to be expelled from the Party." It is important to note that all of the crimes offer a possible explanation as to why Party policies had not worked or why bad things in general had happened in communities under the Party's control. Lê Văn Lương did not specify what precisely was to happen to Party members accused of committing the five crimes above:

> Of the five categories above, we shall be severe [with Party members] who fall into the first four categories. When dealing with them, mass mobilization teams must correctly follow these guidelines: *resolute and careful*. [A case] should be discussed collectively by members of mass mobilization team Command Committee [Ban chỉ huy đội công tác], with attention paid to the ideas of party members and the masses. [The decision] must be approved by the mass mobilization brigade leadership. The brigade leadership should establish an organization bureau

[190] Ibid, 358.

on which will sit a representative of the Central Committee Organization Bureau, who will help the Brigade leadership resolve the cases in a timely manner.[191]

Lê Văn Lương's directive instructed that the first four of the five different types of crimes listed above were to be handled "severely" [nghiêm khắc]. What was it about the fifth crime that caused it not to be included in the "severe" category? The fifth category differed from the first three in that it made no mention of the offending Party member having been involved in some way with the enemy. And it differed from the fourth of the five categories in that it made no mention of the offending Party member as having come from or being under the influence of the landlord class.

The Three Steps of Party Reorganization

1. **Step one**: (To be carried out during the [first step] of the mass mobilization plan when cadres carry out propaganda and strike roots)

During this step, mass mobilization cadres shall mainly educate the Party cell about the goals and meaning of the mass mobilization along with the responsibility of Party members during the movement. After that, the local Party members should be made to carry out self-criticism about their implementation of land policy in the past and up to today. Through that, the mass mobilization cadre will give party members a preliminary education about class standpoint and encourage them to participate in the mass mobilization.

During the process of educating party members, the mass mobilization cadre should investigate the state of the cell members' thinking and organization. He should strike root and make contact with the good party members who have the necessary requirements.

2. **Step two**: (To be carried out during the second step of mass mobilization, when cadres are to organize the spreading of contacts [xâu chuỗi] and the preliminary re-education of the organization).

During this step, the first category of Party cell should be educated, guided, and helped to lead the masses, to raise themselves up during the movement. In handling the second category of Party cell, the cadre should focus primarily on reforming the cell executive by appointing a provisional cell executive. Purge the bad elements from the cell executive and replace them with good party members. […] In addition, the cadre should carry out the following tasks: train the good party members, expel those cruel and despotic elements who are to be brought before the peasants for struggle, and also expel those bad party members who sabotage the mass mobilization. Suspend the activities of bad party members. As for the third category of party cell, it should be disbanded. […]

3. **Step three**: (To be carried out during [the fifth and final step] of the mass mobilization program, when local organizations are reorganized, the masses educated, and the commune repartitioned [chia lại]

[191] Ibid, 360.

> This step should see the completion of the Party cell's reorganization and includes a few different tasks: study, sum-up and de-brief on the work of the cell. Party members should also carry out self-criticism and evaluations of each other. Bad party members should be dealt with and the positive example of good party members pointed out. The mass mobilization cadre should oversee the election of a new Party cell executive, set a work plan, set an activity and work regimine for the cell, admit new members into the Party.[192]

Staffing the Mass Mobilization

Beginning the mass mobilization in early 1953 was similar to opening up a second front in the war. The mass mobilization 'soldiers' who carried out the campaign were primarily recruited from the DRV bureaucracy. The Party leaders wanted educated people to carry out the mobilization. In Vietnam's National Archives, I was able to look at the list of cadres for two land reform brigades. The average age of the first was 29 years and the second, 30 years old, with cadres as young as 18 years old and as old as 44 years. The mass mobilization apparatus appears, therefore, to have been akin to a 'petite-bourgeois bureaucrat army' carrying out a campaign against alleged internal enemies of the DRV state. One of the strangest aspects of this bureaucrat army was the fact that many of its 'soldiers' were from elite rural backgrounds, meaning that these cadres were tasked with attacking each others' parents and families.

In November 1953, as the Party leaders were looking toward beginning the second phase of the mass mobilization—the more radical land reform phase when the landlord class would be completely overthrown—an internal report on "Organizational Work" provided a rough outline of how the mass mobilization apparatus was to be staffed. All levels of the Party and government bureaucracy were to develop plans for how they would supply members from their offices (both Party members and non-Party members) to work as mass mobilization cadres. The key was to supply the mass mobilization with cadre recruits in a way that did not adversely impact the office's ability to carry out its normal responsibilities. The Party leaders wanted, to the exent possible, all members of the bureaucracy to participate in "at least" one wave of mass mobilization.[193]

Offices organizing members to participate in the mass mobilization were to think of their members as falling into three categories. The first comprised those recruits who could serve as mass mobilization cadres on a long-term basis, becoming members of the "land reform main-force units" [đội quân chủ lực của cải cách ruộng đất]. The second category comprised those cadres who might serve the campaign for one or two waves. And the third comprised office members who, "for one reason or another," could not serve as actual cadres for the campaign but only "observe" [tham gia] a part of the campaign (usually one of the struggle sessions).[194]

The Party leaders recognized that different government offices had different demands that affected how many members of its office could be sent to work as mass mobilization cadres. Nevertheless, they put forward "2/3" as a basic guideline for the percentage of a government office staff that was to be supplied to the mass mobilization apparatus when the campaign came

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[192] Ibid, 362-63.
[193] Lê Văn Lương, "Công tác tổ chức đối với cuộc vận động cải cách ruộng đất" [Organizational Work and the Mobilization for Land Reform] (Report delivered at the 5th Plenum of the Party Executive, November 1953), *VKDTT 1953*, 492.
[194] Ibid.

to a nearby area. The Party leaders frequently stressed the tremendous benefit that serving as a mass mobilization cadre would provide to its bureaucrats and intellectuals.

> Our Party must fasten itself to that [class] struggle and complete its duty to lead the struggle. Only in that way can we gain real practice in and completely absorb Marxism-Leninism during the real struggle. Such training in the actual struggle is one hundred or even one thousand times more valuable than the normal education during normal times.[195]

With such thinking, the loss in effectiveness that an office suffered for a number of months as a result of the departure of two thirds of its staff was only a minor setback. For the invaluable lessons in Marxism-Leninism accrued from the experience leading the "actual struggle" in the countryside were of such educational value to the cadre that he or she must return to his or her office a much more ("one hundred times more") effective worker. This tremendous educational boost, as the theory went, was well worth the price of any temporary disruptions of normal work.

Perhaps to supplement these ideological and educational incentives for participating in the mass mobilization, the Party leaders also let it be known to recruited cadres that, to some extent, their careers were 'on the line' with respect to how they performed:

> The land reform is a trial by fire for the cadre because it will shake every branch, every circle, and every relationship in society. The land reform will entirely change the face of society. Standing before the land reform, all regular people will be forced to show their attitude toward it. And this is what we ourselves are especially forced to do. As such, the land reform is a time when the Party can learn about cadres with great accuracy. Through the challenge of the land reform, there will be many cadres who improve, some who improve in leaps and bounds. The Party needs to make use of that opportunity to promote those good cadres (based on correct requirements for promotion) into the Party's leading offices as a means of consolidating those offices. […]

The 'carrot' above was followed by the 'stick' below:

> Naturally, on the one hand, we promote the good cadres. On the other hand, with respect to those elements who have shortcomings, who pass through education but do not bother to fix their problems, who do not implement the policies, who resist the land reform, the Party will have to carry out strict and clear discipline. These are the two sides to the issue. […][196]

Propagandizing the Mass Mobilization

In addition to fine-tuning its mass mobilization policies during 1953, the Party leaders needed to develop a strategy for propagandizing the campaign that would facilitate its smooth implementation. For example, a circular [thông tri] released on June 29, 1953 titled "On the Issue of Propagandizing the Mass Mobilization," deals with 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:

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[195] Ibid, 489.
[196] Ibid, 495.

> 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.[197]

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 people who feared becoming targets of the campaign. The circular stated:

> …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 [đại gian, đại ác cực độ]. 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.[198]

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[197] Ban Bí thư [Party Secretariat], "Thông tri của Ban Bí thư, 29/6 /1953: Về vấn đề tuyên truyền phát động quần chúng." [Secretariat Communique, 29/6/1953: On the Issue of Propagandizing the Mass Mobilization], *VKDTT 1953*, 246.

[198] Ibid, 246-250.

These passages suggest that a key goal of the propaganda strategy was to assuage people's fears and reduce the incidence of "spontaneous struggles" and panicked resistance. Moreover, it is clear that the Party leadership saw the press as a propaganda organ to be used in the overall implementation of the mass mobilization, not as an institution standing outside it. Their job was to depict the campaign in the way that the Party leadership thought would facilitate its smooth implementation—such as by promising a nervous DRV population that everyone who followed the law would have "nothing to worry about."

As was frequently the case, though, what appears in the Party's internal discussions tells 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.[199] In other words, the Party leadership had already decided roughly how many people should be executed during rent reduction before cadres had even 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,[200] the May 4, 1953 directive indicates that the Politburo wanted its mass mobilization apparatus to execute about eight thousand people during this initial phase of the campaign.

Because the Politburo had operated on the basis of an execution ratio for the rent reduction, the logic of which was defended in that May 4, 1953 directive, there is no reason to think that it would not have set a ratio for the land reform phase of the campaign as well. We may reasonably conclude that any execution ratio for that more radical phase, when the landlord class was to be "completely overthrown" [triệt để đánh đổ], would have been considerably higher than 1 to 1000. What this execution ratio was for the ten million people who underwent land reform, whether it changed over time and place, and how the Politburo came up with it, remains one of the most important secrets of the land reform.

Evidence that the VWP leadership wanted to conceal the scope and character of the mass mobilization campaign from the northern Vietnamese population, the Party rank and file, and foreign observers appears in a number of different internal documents. For example, Nguyễn Tất 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 the following instructions regarding the upcoming land reform (which had been discussed during the meeting):

> Now, on returning home, you may not shoot your mouths off [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], then 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.[201]

Later in the speech, the DRV leader again stressed again the need for secrecy.

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[199] VWP politburo, "Chỉ thị của Bộ Chính trị về mấy vấn đề đặc biệt trong phát động quần chúng, 4/5/1953" [Politburo Directive on a few Special Issues in Mass Mobilization, May 4, 1953], *VKDTT 1953*, 201-206.
[200] Moise, 176. He reports the number as being "about 7,800."
[201] HCM p. 507.

> With respect to [those of you] from regions that have not yet undergone mobilization as well as other regions, you may not shoot your mouths off. You must keep this secret. When you, as representatives, return [to your communities], you must only report [the contents of this meeting] to the Regional committee and to no one else. Afterwards, it will be up to the Regional 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" [tương] about either this report or the policy. Are all of you clear on this? You absolutely must remember this.[202]

As Nguyễn Tất Thành had promised, nineteen days later on December 12, 1953, the Central Committee released a directive [chỉ thị] 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 was 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, the 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 [vơ đũa cả nắm]. The purpose [of this policy] 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 leadership wanted the land reform to be propagandized in those places about to undergo the campaign, Trường Chinh stated:

> 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 [đội công tác] enters the village to carry out land reform, it will organize sessions to study the policy then.[203]

Thus it appears that the key details of the campaign were to be revealed to communities only after the land reform team had already arrived. Among the Party leaders, there appears to have been great concern about the loss of potential struggle targets. Virtually everything about the campaign hinged on having landlords—they were the essential part of the experience. Without landlords, there could be no struggle session. There could be no scape-goat for the difficulties of the war and the problems with the Party's policies.

Legalizing the Land Reform: December 1953

[202] Hồ Chí Minh [Nguyễn Tất Thành], "Diễn văn bế mạc của Chủ tịch Hồ Chí Minh, 23/11/1953" [Closing Words of Chairman Hồ Chí Minh], *VKDTT 1953*, 504-511.
[203] Trường Chinh, "Chỉ thị của ban bí thư về việc tuyên truyền chính sách cải cách ruộng đất" [Directive from the General Secretary Office on Propagandizing Land Reform Policy], *Văn Kiện Đảng Toàn Tập*, v. 14, 537-549.

Another aspect of the Party leaders' overall propaganda strategy was the diffusion of responsibility for the land reform throughout the entire government—this was part of the reason why Nguyễn Tất Thành had been so keen for cadres not to say anything about the land reform (as opposed to the rent reduction phase of the mass mobilization). In the month of December 1953, this process of legalization would be carried out, with the Party leaders drawing together as many of the regime's leaders and representatives as possible to obtain their approval for the land reform, building toward the release of the government Land Reform Law. From that point forward, the Party's press organs would almost always refer to the campaign as the policy of the government and National Assembly.

Approval from United Vietnam and the National Assembly

With respect to the government meetings that took place during the last weeks of 1953 leading up to the promulgation of the "Land Reform Law," the first were the above-mentioned 5th Plenum of the Party Executive and the 1st All-Nation Meeting of Party Representatives, which took place from November 14-23, 1953. A description of that joint meeting in *The People* stated that the "Fifth Plenum of the Central [Executive] Committee discussed the land reform policy in order to present it for discussion to the First Meeting of Party Representatives."[204] In what appears to be an attempt to give agency to the much broader Meeting of Party Representatives, the article from *The People* described the activities of that larger meeting as follows. "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…"[205]

On November 26, three days after the conclusion of the two Party meetings mentioned above, it was the turn of United Vietnam to share in the responsibility for the land reform. This meeting was also reported in the December 16, 1953 issue of *The People* in an article titled, "The Meeting of the United Vietnam Committee has Succeeded Spectacularly." The long article on the meeting had two sub-headings, which together seem to reflect the overall propaganda purpose of the meeting. The first was "A Spirit of Democratic Negotiation" and the second, "Unified and Unanimous." The following quote apparently shows how "democratic negotiation" was supposed to appear in the minds of the Party leaders:

> 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 Đề 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 Kỷ, 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 Law and a central committee member of the Democratic Party, Mr. Hoàng-tích-Tri, head of

[204] Ban Chấp hành Trung ương Đảng Lao động Việt Nam [VWP Executive], "Thông cáo về Hội nghị Trung ương lần thứ 5 và Hội nghị Toàn quốc lần thứ 1 của Đảng Lao động Việt Nam" [Communique on the 5th Plenum of the Executive and the 1st All-Nation Plenum of the VWP], *Nhân dân* [The People], no. 154, December 16, 1953.
[205] Hội nghị toàn quốc lần thứ nhất của Đảng Lao động Việt Nam [1st All-Nation Plenum of the VWP], *Nhân dân*, no. 154, December 16, 1953.

> Ministry of Health, and Dr. Phạm Ngọc Thạch who just arrived from the South. They were enaged 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.[206]

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 key theme of the image was the extreme care taken by members of United Vietnam to consider fully 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 them 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 [chín chắn] of the revolutionary line set forth by Chairman Hồ and the Central Committee.[207]

The second subheading, "Unified and Unanimous," was followed by descriptions of members of the United Vietnam front 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 occupying land and 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."[208] The article continued in this vain, with approving quotes from various members of United Vietnam. It was supplemented by another quasi-article titled, "Democratic Parties, People's Mass Organizations, and Democratic Personalities in the Front Enthusiastically Support the Land Reform Policy." All five columns of the newspaper's third page, from top to bottom, and two and a half additional columns on the following page, were devoted to a collage of one-to-two paragraph comments from front members in support of the land reform.

The overall impression of both articles on United Vietnam and the land reform was that rural elites who had contributed to the resistance war might be forced to sell some of their land to the DRV state, but that was about it. There was no mention anywhere in these United Vietnam comments the term "public denunciation" [đấu or đấu tố] or "Special People's Court." *The People* had already run 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.

On December 1, 1953, a day or two after the completion of the United Vietnam meeting, it was the turn of the National Assembly. To call together members of the National Assembly at this time was truly extraordinary, because this political body had not met since back in 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-

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[206] Xuân Trường, "Hội nghị Ủy ban Liên Việt Toàn quốc mở rộng đã thành công rực rỡ" [The Expanded All-Nation Meeting of United Vietnam has Succeeded Spectacularly], *Nhân dân* [The People], no. 155, December 21, 1953.
[207] Ibid.
[208] Ibid.

generated laws.[209] With a policy as radical and communistic as the land reform, it must have felt more important than ever to Nguyễn Tất Thành and the top Party leaders to orchestrate strong support for it from the DRV's most democratic-looking institution, the National Assembly.

The December 26, 1953 "special issue" of *The People* was devoted almost entirely to the National Assembly and its passing of the Land Reform Law. The issue essentially followed the same form as the December 21 issue of the newspaper on United Vietnam. Indeed, the main article on the National Assembly was written again 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" [thảo luận sôi nổi] and the favored motif of "gray heads" hard at work, studying the details of the land reform policy, was used again as it had been in *The People's* coverage of United Vietnam. Again, the newspaper 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 we need to carry out forced purchases of land belonging to democratic notables, resistance-war landlords, and normal landlords." And again, *The People* laid out a collage of supportive quotes from a wide variety of National Assembly members. The final act of the National Assembly, carried out on December 4, was described as follows:

> At the end of the part devoted 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-Tưởng, Deputy Minister of Law, rose and read aloud the entirety of the land reform law, which had been added to by the National Assembly. All of the respresentatives raise their right hands in a show of approval. With complete unanimity, [the National Assembly] approved the land reform law. All those in the assembly hall then rose. The slogans "Chairman Hồ forever" and "All Hail the National Assembly" echoed forth. Immediately thereafter, the National Assembly showed their absolute faith in Chairman Hồ and the Government. 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.[210]

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

However, a close examination of the Land Reform Law itself reveals a few things that might have caused anxious readers to 'raise an eyebrow' and other things that readers at the time might not have noticed but that we, with some knowledge of the Party's internal discourse and long-term goals, should note. The Land Reform Law had all the formal appearance of a "bourgeois democratic" legal document, with chapters, sub-sections, and clauses. But the content

[209] This was the political institution, copied from the Soviet government, that had drawn harsh criticism from the editors of the Nationalist Party newspaper, *Vietnam*, back in 1946.

[210] Xuân Trường, "Những ngày lịch sử: Quốc hội Việt Nam họp lần thứ 3" [Historical Days: The Vietnamese National Assembly Meets for the Third Time], *Nhân dân* [The People], no. 156, December 26, 1953.

of the document departed from the Western legal tradition in both principle and spirit in some interesting ways. The law also contained some subtle contradictions that shed light on the thinking of the Party leaders in crafting the document. When considered together, the odd aspects of the document all seem to be explained by one overriding fear of the Party leaders: that the actual situation on the ground would not furnish a sufficient number of landlords to make the land reform meaningful.

The Land Reform Law had 38 clauses, which were divided into five chapters. The first chapter 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 increase agricultural production; 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, and the role of land reform as merely a step toward that final goal, it is noteworthy that the Land Reform Law contains such a forceful affirmation of the principle of private property. Indeed, "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 and third goals of the land reform as expressed in the official law, boosting production and improving the livelihood of the peasants by carrying out a more even distribution of land in the countryside, might have been feasible in theory if that new absentee landlord, the DRV state, had not been in the mix with its enormous needs. The Party's own internal reports on the situation in the countryside suggest strongly that peasants frequently found the agricultural tax so burdensome, particularly with all the disruptions and challenges posed by the war, that it made better sense for them economically to return free land given to them by the DRV state. The DRV state had been distributing French colonial and "Vietnamese traitor" land since the August Revolution. Even if this redistribution of land had produced some bump in agricultural productivity (the evidence suggests the opposite), it would not have been nearly enough to offset the growing needs of the DRV state, which had to provision a steadily growing bureaucracy as well as five divisions of ground troops, with plans for further military expansion.

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, there was no question of actually paying money for these "compulsory sales." Instead, "payment" would come in the form of a ten-year government bond set at a yearly interest rate of 1.5 percent. It is safe to assume that the Party leaders issued this bond for the sake of form and had no real intention of ever paying it back.

The third section of that second chapter contained what was arguably the Land Reform Law's greatest departure from the legal tradition of the Western democracies. Clause 5 of that section stated:

> From the day when when the rent reduction decree was promulgated (14/7/1949) to the day when the decree on the mass mobilization for complete rent reduction (12/4/19453), 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.

This part of the law did not punish landlords for having sold their land between July 1949 and April 1953. But it did punish any landlord or rich peasant who had been on the purchasing end of the land sale by stating that his purchased land no longer belonged to him and that it would be "confiscated, requisitioned, or seized through compulsory sale according to each situation…" But if we look 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 absolutely "legal" according to the regime's own laws for anybody to buy or sell land, regardless of what his or her motive may have been.

A similar observation can be made about the May 12, 1953 rent reduction decree (sắc lệnh 149/SL). Clause 6 of the land reform law stated: "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 decree from April 1953 in no way forbids the purchase or sale of land. In fact, clause 14 of that decree states 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." Again, there is nothing in this April 1953 decree outlawing the sale or purchase of land for any reason. Therefore, the description of such an action in the Land Reform Law as "illegal" is a clear violation of 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 that law was passed. According to the Universal Human Rights Declaration adopted by the United Nations in 1948, this is a human rights violation.[211]

The third chapter of the Land Reform Law was titled "The Method of Distributing Land" and dealt with questions related to which types of land would be distributed, which types of people were eligible to receive land, and how the land would actually be distributed. Clause 26 explained the basic "principle" guiding land distribution.

> - Those who lack a lot shall receive a lot. Those who do not lack shall receive nothing.
> - Land distribution should be done on the basic of allowing people to keep land they are already cultivating. Those who have a lot of land should compensate for those who have only a little, and those who have good land should compensate for those who have poor quality land.
> - Land should be distributed according to person, of course not according to labor power.
> - Take the average acreage and the average yield of a locality and use that as a standard for distribution.

[211] The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on December 10, 1948, states in the second clause of Article 11: "No one shall be held guilty of any penal offence on account of any act or omission which did not constitute a penal offence, under national or international law, at the time when it was committed. Nor shall a heavier penalty be imposed than the one that was applicable at the time the penal offence was committed."

- Land should be distributed within the commune. But if a commune has few people and much land, then, after having distributed enough land to the peasants of that commune, a part of its land can be parceled off for a commune with many people and little land.

The simple and vague nature of these principles combined with the small amount of time that a land reform cadre had to carry out land redistribution in his assigned community posed a serious challenge to him. Indeed, these factors militated against the likelihood that his distribution of land (and belongings confiscated from "landlords") in the village would leave the community in the state of social harmony that seems to have been implied by the simple principles for the distribution of land.

The fourth chapter of the land reform law was titled "The Executive Office and the Method of Implementing the Land Reform." It was in this section that the crucial issue of class demarcation was discussed. Obviously, the class that a family was assigned during the land reform was going to be the most important factor determining how they would be affected by the campaign. As such, the criteria used to determine a person's class during the land reform were of the utmost importance from the perspective of the rural population, especially the better-off members of communities. 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 were "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 commune's decision on class demarcation must be approved either by the provincial level Resistance Committee or an office delegated by that committee.
- Should a conflict arise, the case must be given to the Special People's Court for resolution.

Thus we see in the above explanations of class demarcation that they provide no concrete measure that could be used by a person to argue for why he should be assigned one class as opposed to another. The land reform law had nothing 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 gush of 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.

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1. THE RESULTS OF MASS MOBILIZATION WAVE 2:

Wave 2 of the mass mobilization was carried out in 40 communes that were a part of 6 districts located in the 2 provinces of Thái Nguyên and Bắc Giang. Thái Nguyên had 33 communes belonging to the 4 districts of Đồng Hỷ, Đại Từ, Phú Bình, and Phú Lương. [In the province of] Bắc Giang, there were 7 communes 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 commune was 927 and the largests commune 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 commune 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 give the death penalty, 67 of whom were given prison sentences from 3 to 20 years. Among the 40 communes, there were 4 that had no targets for struggle: Tân Phú, Phú Cương, Hoàng Sơn, and Đồng Tiến communes. 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 [dân nghèo]. 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 communes have been divided up into 84 new communes.
- 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 [tiểu chủ]. 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.

[…][212]

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, the Peasant Association, the People's Committee, the People's Militia, and the local Public Security office. The land reform law, on the other hand, was completely devoid of this type of quantitative discourse.

It is also worth noting the extent to which the picture of the countryside presented in Hoàng Hữu Nhân's report reflected what Trường Chinh's land inspection from the end of 1952 had essentially instructed the people carrying it out to find. Indeed, the overall impression of Hoàng Hữu Nhân's report is one of obedience and eagerness to show the Central Committee (the Party leaders) that his mass mobilization brigade had found the type of things that the Party leaders had told him he should find. His report and others available for viewing in the archives suggest that the Party leaders and their Chinese advisers monitored and measured the success of the campaign mostly by the numbers. How many people were in a commune? 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 the peasant association? What percentage of these two organizations do poor peasants now comprise?

[212] TTLT3, UB CCRD, File 15.

Chapter 4

The End of the War: Điện Biên Phủ and the Geneva Accords

This chapter examines the last months of the First Indochina War, focusing on the DRV's victory at Điện Biên Phủ and the negotiations at the Geneva Conference (May 8 to July 20, 1954), which brought the war to a close.[213] The battle of Điện Biên Phủ has become a part of the Party's official narrative of the land reform, with Communist historians arguing that the campaign's promise of "land to the tiller" played a key role in spurring the DRV's peasant soldiers on to victory.[214] No doubt this was how the Party leaders believed that their peasant soldiers should think about the land reform, but was it actually the case? Recent scholarship on the DRV experience of the battle of Điện Biên Phủ,[215] along with glimpses of the DRV side that appear in older, French Union-focused accounts of the battle, and even the careful remarks about the battle put forward by Võ Nguyên Giáp in his accounts, raise questions about the validity of this narrative.

The second half of the chapter shifts to the Geneva Conference's negotiations on Indochina, which began just a few hours after DRV soldiers defeated the French Union garrison at Điện Biên Phủ. As we will see, the final terms of the Geneva Accords had important implications for the land reform. But the negotiations themselves are also worth examining for what they reflect about the position of the DRV relative to its key allies, the Soviet Union and the PRC. It has long been believed by Western scholars of all political persuasions that the Soviets and Chinese, largely for their own interests, pressured their Vietnamese comrades into accepting a bad settlement at Geneva—one that did not do justice to what DRV soldiers had earned on the battlefield.[216]

In recent years, however, Pierre Asselin and Christopher Goscha, using internal DRV documents, have begun to raise questions about the accuracy of this long-accepted view.[217] This study's analysis of the DRV's dire economic situation, especially the Party's inability to slow the decline in agricultural production and prevent the steady spread of famine conditions, supports this recent revisionist trend in our field to some extent. However, after weighing some of the key evidence, I argue that the issue of the actual feelings of the DRV leaders about the Geneva Accords and the help afforded to them by their Soviet and Chinese allies at the conference should remain an open question, since none of the evidence on either side of the debate is conclusive. As such, it remains difficult to use the DRV experience with the Soviets and Chinese on the international diplomatic front in Geneva as a means of estimating the impact of PRC pressure on the VWP leadership with respect to its key domestic policies such as the land reform. While I believe that the timing of the land reform was probably forced upon the VWP leaders by

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[213] The 1954 Geneva Conference was divided into two sections. The first, from April 26 to May 7, was devoted to discussions on Korea, and the second, from May 8 until July 21, dealt with Indochina.

[214] Dương Trung Quốc, "Hơn nửa thế kỳ 'Người cày có ruộng'" [Over Half a Century Later, 'Land to the Tiller'], *Xưa và nay* [Past and Present], no. 297, December 2007, 8.

[215] Christopher Goscha, "'Hell in a Very Small Place:' Cold War and Decolonization in the Assault on the Vietnamese Body at Dien Bien Phu," *European Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2010, 201-223.

[216] Pierre Asselin, "The Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the 1954 Geneva Conference: A Revisionist Critique," *The Journal of Cold War History*, vol. 11, no. 2, May 2011, 155-195. Asselin provides numerous examples of this view in the introduction to his essay.

[217] Goscha, "Hell in a Very Small Place," 2010.

Stalin and that the campaign's content and form were based on CCP prescriptions, I suspect that much of what happened with the campaign after Geneva was a reflection of the VWP Politburo's genuine belief in what the land reform had to offer their regime.

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 certainly heading in a positive direction. Their Party's 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 conduct 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 the army, were getting worse and worse. Though Chinese food aid,[218] along with foodstuffs requisitioned from Cambodian and Laotian farmers,[219] 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. As we saw in the last chapter, in 1953, 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 nerves of the Party leaders (not to mention the people themselves): with every harvest, rice collection became more imperative and more difficult as the amount needed to feed the army, feed the bureaucracy, and now, increasingly, to carry out famine relief, 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, etc.. 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 quite at that point in the summer of 1953, but its leaders had to have recognized that they were heading there. (As stated before, it is primarily for this reason that I believe the DRV leaders may have been eager to take advantage of what compromise with the French at Geneva promised: a badly needed respite from fighting that would enable the Party leaders to put their economic affairs in order, to heal the wounds suffered by their army at Điện Biên Phủ, and to resume the fight at a later date from a stronger overall position.)

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 from France that the DRV's opponents might be edging toward an abandonment of the fight. On June

[218] 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.

[219] Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam or Indochina: Contesting Concepts of Space in Vietnamese Nationalism, 1887-1954*, Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Report Series, no. 28, 1995, 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.

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]." As the historian Yves Gras points out, 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.[220] For many people in France, the Korean War armistice, which was concluded a month after Laniel's statement, stirred up hopes that some sort of armistice could be reached in Indochina as well.[221]

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, extremely 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 and explain to others the Korean armistice and the talk of peace coming from the French government. Other than from the French Communist Party, the article stated, any talk of peace from French politicians was a "Machiavellian scheme" meant to "fool" the French public and to "dampen the fighting spirit of the Vietnamse 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 in order 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."[222] As the DRV leaders were able to piece together the basic elements of the plan, which involved another two whole years of fighting, in the fall of 1953, they must have felt that their cynical interpretation of the French government's peace discourse was entirely justified.[223]

Thus it remained crucial to fight on, but how much longer? The end of the Korean War would probably mean that more Soviet military equipment could be sent their way from China, but their French Union opponents were likely to enjoy a similar boost in support from the United States. Meanwhile, extracting the necessary sacrifice in rice, soldiers, and people's porters from the zones that the DRV controlled was requiring ever harsher measures on the part of local Party cadres. This was part of the logic of the land reform's purge of local Party cells. The DRV leaders needed to cleanse themselves and their product, the "people's democratic regime," of the stains left by the harsh methods local cadres were increasingly forced to use to extract the necessary sacrifice from an exhausted people.

The Navarre Plan

When the French Prime Minister, Rene Mayer, selected Navarre to take over from General Salan, he informed his new hire that the government was looking for "an honorable departure" from Indochina. As usual, such a departure required some sort of convincing military victory that would put France in a strong negotiating position with the DRV. In this sense, the

[220] As quoted in Gras, *The Indochina War*, 503.
[221] Kevin Ruane, "Anthony Eden, British Diplomacy, and the Origins of the Geneva Conference of 1954," *The Historical Journal*, 37, 1 (1994), 158.
[222] Nhân dân [The People], "Nhận định về cuộc đình chiến Triều tiên và ảnh hưởng đối với cuộc kháng chiến Việt-Miên-Lào" [Assessing the Korean Ceasefire and its Influence on the Vietnamese-Cambodian-Laos resistance War], *Nhân dân* [The People], no. 130, August 16, 1953.
[223] Goscha, *Historical Dictionary*, 307.

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 completely destroying the DRV forces and ending the war entirely through force of arms had begun to be questioned by French political and military leaders since the CCP victory in 1949. From that point onward, such a hope seems to have increasingly faded from most people's realm of possibility.[224]

As mentioned, Navarre's plan stretched over a period of two years. During the first year (the upcoming autumn campaign), the French Union forces would "contain" the DRV forces, which meant avoiding major confrontations in the northern third of the country where its divisions were based, seeking instead softer targets in central and southern Vietnam. This cautious approach would be used to buy time for further training of the State of Vietnam's army as the key part of a broader effort to build up the French Union forces. Navarre envisioned that the following year (1954-1955), with larger and stronger forces under his command, and with a boost in American military aid, he could carry out a large-scale offensive in the North, striking painful blows against the DRV's main forces and convincing its leaders 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.[225]

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 apparently felt strongly that the DRV should not be be allowed to march unopposed through Laos as this would negatively impact the morale of France's allies in Indochina.[226] A similar logic applied vis-à-vis the ethnic minority groups on the Laos-Vietnam border. French efforts to recruit, arm, and train ethnic minority members living in the high region between the countries had borne some fruit over the last couple of years.[227] It seemed worthwhile to prevent this part of Indochina from coming under complete DRV control. Ultimately, the 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 for the country's defense.[228]

Navarre 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 effectively the expected DRV push into that neighboring country. Traveling westward from Hà

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[224] Gras, 266. General Revers had come to the conclusion in his 1949 report on the war that, in light of both past Frenh Union 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.

[225] Gras, 511-514. For a clear and pithy description of Navarre's plan, see Goscha, *Historical Dictionary of the Indochina War:1945-1954* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2012), 306-307.

[226] Fall, *Hell in Very Small Place*, 33.

[227] Ibid, 443. Fall describes the Thai 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.

[228] Roy, *The Battle of Dien Bien Phu* (1963 repr., New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2002). Roy argues that this vagueness on the issue of Laos was not accidental, stemming 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.

Nội along Route 6 toward Laos, Nà Sản was about 290 kilometers away from the city, only about two thirds the distance to the northwestern section of the Lao border considered to be the likely launching point for a DRV stab into that country toward Luang Prabang, its traditional capital. A better location for the defense of Laos, in the eyes of Navarre and some other French military leaders (including Navarre's predecessor, General Salan), was a place located an additional 180 kilometers to the west of Nà Sản along Route 6—the border town of Điển Biên Phủ.[229] It lay 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) "Thái Federation," which comprised the mountainous region between Laos and Vietnam.[230]

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. Leaders of the airforce were concerned that Điện Biên Phủ was on the very outer limits of their fighter planes' fuel capacity, allowing for only a few minutes of air support. Others pointed to the valley's frequent spells of rain and fog, which would cut the air bridge between the base and supplies in Hà Nội.[231]

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, in a northwesterly direction toward and into Laos. There had been some discussion of a major offensive in the Red River delta, but this had been abandoned ultimately for the much safer option toward the northwest, where remoteness would mitigate the French advantage in firepower. As usual, French intelligence services, through listening to radio conversations and through following DRV troop movements via aerial photography, were soon able to piece together the basic outline of their opponent's plan.[232] On November 2, Navarre called for preparations to be made for the occupation of Điện Biên Phủ, code-named "Operation Castor," at some point within the next three to four weeks. On November 20, 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 Union 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 Union forces had gained sufficient control over the valley and made the needed improvements to the airstrip to begin the process of fortifying the base at Điện Biên Phủ.

Between General Navarre and his second-in-command, General Cogny, there had been some miscommunication about what the actual function of the base at Điện Biên Phủ would be. This lack of clarity would have disastrous consequences for the French Union side. Navarre had assumed that Điện Biên Phủ would be made into an entrenched camp much like the recently abandoned camp at Nà Sản, though he thought that it would be of only secondary importance. General Cogny, commander of the French Union forces in Tonkin and therefore directly responsible for the Điện Biên Phủ operation, 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 "Thai Federation." Neither of these two French generals expected that Điện Biên Phủ would

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[229] "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 garrision is named "Mương Thành."

[230] Gras, 516. The capital of the "Thái Federation" had been in the small outpost of Lai Châu, about fifty kilometers to the north of Điện Biên Phủ, to which it was evacuated after the French Union forces first landed in the valley.

[231] Gras, 521.

[232] Gras, 520.

become the decisive battle of the war.[233] Ultimately, Cogny's different vision appears to have been crucial, as the garrison (especially the construction of "strong-points" around its airstrip), was not fortified to the extent that Nà Sản had been. By the time the French military leadership realized that the garrison was surrounded by four DRV divisions, and by the time the Geneva Conference was officially announced (February 19, 1954), suddenly giving the impending battle an enormous unanticipated significance, it was too late to improve the camp's deficient fortifications.[234]

The DRV "Combat Plan" for Điện Biên Phủ

While Generals Navarre and Cogny had not expected Điện Biên Phủ to take on the importance that it eventually did, a December 6, 1953 report to the Politburo by Võ Nguyên Giáp on behalf of the Central Military Command [Tổng quân ủy] suggests that the DRV leaders recognized relatively early in the game the special opportunity that French investment of Điện Biên Phủ provided. The DRV military command estimated that their opponents had about six battalions in the valley by early December and noted that efforts had been made 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 [what French intensions are]. However, if we want to guarantee implementation of the Central Committee's determination to destroy the enemy and liberate the region of Lai Châu [district] – [Laos'] Phongsaly [province] all the way to Luang Prabang during the Winter-Spring [period], then we have to focus on and prepare for a situation whereby 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]. As such, 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 are able to overcome our difficulties and carry out the campaign, then this victory will be a huge one.[235]

Võ Nguyên 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 and that they would attack the garrison in two stages [đợt], with the first ending in late January. Their forces would then pause for about twenty days to "make adjustments" and integrate reinforcements before beginning the second stage of the battle. Giáp anticipated that his troops would be able to attack for about forty-five days, meaning that the campaign would need to be completed by early May.[236]

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[233] Fall, 31-33. Gras, 522.

[234] Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place*, 87-90.

[235] 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: NXB Quân đội Nhân dân, 2004], 207.

[236] The historian Qiang Zhai, basing his brief account of the DRV decision to attack the French Union-Vietnamese 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 Union garrison may have originated from the Chinese military adviser to the DRV, Wei Guoqing. 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),

With respect to the supplies needed for the battle, the DRV's "Combat Plan" estimated that it would require 4,200 tons of rice (this did not include additional rice to feed the roughly 30,000 "people's porters" needed for the campaign). Where would the 4,200 tons of rice come from? Võ Nguyên Giáp stated that the DRV would "make the most of the potential of localities in the Northwest, with the rest to be taken from Phú Thọ and Thanh Hóa [provinces]." In addition to the 4,200-plus tons of rice, the Điện Biên Phủ campaign would require 100 tons of dried vegetable, 100 tons of meat, 80 tons of salt, and 12 tons of sugar, "all of which will mainly be brought up from Thanh Hóa province," the plan stated.[237] 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 massive trucks (for some less dense foodstuffs, the volume of 30 tons would far exceed the spatial capacity of one truck).[238]

How would this enormous quantity of food be squeezed out of a local population that was desperately short of food already, with pockets of famine conditions appearing in every single DRV-controlled region? 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.[239] 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 signed up 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 VWP leaders, who tended to blame them (or make them the scapegoats) for the disappointing results of the Party's various economic policies. The land reform program had already marked these local Party members for "reorganization" (purge).

On December 19, Võ Nguyên Giáp released an "Order of the Day on the Seventh Anniversary of the All-National Resistance War and the Ninth Anniversary of the Founding of the Army." In his order, the DRV general stressed three "new and advantageous conditions" which would help to counter the Navarre Plan. The first and third were, respectively, the implementation of political and military rectification and the support of the World Democratic Peace Front led by the Soviet Union. The second was the implementation of the land reform campaign:

> Second is the fact that our Party and Government has mobilized the peasants to struggle for the implementation of rent and debt reduction, achieving many victories. At the beginning of this month, the National Assembly unanimously [đồng thanh] passed the land reform law, giving

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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 Zhai Qiang, "China and the Geneva Conference of 1954," *The China Quarterly*, no. 129, March 1992, 103-122.

[237] Võ Nguyên Giáp, 210.

[238] Pierre Asselin, in a brief article about the battle of Điện Biên Phủ titled cites a speech given by John Foster Dulles (published in Melvin Gurtov's *The First Vietnam Crisis: Chinese Communist Strategy and the United States Involvement, 1953-1954* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), claiming that the PRC had provided the DRV with 2,000 tons of food in March 1954. See Pierre Asselin, "New Perspectives on Dien Bien Phu," *Explorations in Southeast Asian Studies*, vol 1, no. 2: fall 1997.

[239] Chen Jian, "China and the First Indochina War," *The China Quarterly*, no. 133, March 1993, 101-102.

> land to the tiller. That is a very important political victory, making our army extremely enthusiastic, and increasing the strength of our resistance war of the entire people and the fighting strength of our army.[240]

This was part of the VWP leadership's official justification for the land reform, but whether DRV troops were actually "extremely enthusiastic" because of the promise of this campaign should remain an open question. Many of the troops had probably been recruited into the army recently enough to have had some experience with the Party's land distributions carried out since the August Revolution in late 1945. These distributions had not generated the excitement that the Party leaders had hoped to see. And it is by no means certain that the promise of more such distributions would not have been seen by many soldiers through the tinted lens of these past efforts. Moreover, if Nguyễn Tất Thành had believed strongly that carrying out land reform would create a meaningful surge of enthusiasm among soldiers, I believe that he would have made the move on his own volition rather than on Stalin's.

By December 27, the DRV forces were in place and all escape routes from Điện Biên Phủ were cut off. 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 hugely outnumbered camp at Nà Sản had done the previous year.[241] As Võ Nguyên Giáp pointed out in a report that he wrote for a March 17, 1954 conference to assess the success of the first stage of the battle and the progress of the second stage:

> 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 to attack Điện Biên Phủ and so they landed troops at Quy Nhơn [in Central Vietnam], further dispersing their forces there. That ill-timed operation has created yet more difficulties for the enemy and put them in an even more defensive position.
>
> Now, 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], 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. […][242]

The Road to the Geneva Conference

On August 4 and September 28, 1953, while General Navarre was thinking about the implementation of his two-year plan that would put the French Union forces into a strong negotiating position with the DRV (perhaps in the spring of 1956 if all went well), the Soviet

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[240] Võ Nguyên Giáp, "Nhật lệnh nhân dịp kỷ niệm lần thứ 7 ngày toàn quốc kháng chiến và lần thứ 9 ngày thành lập quân đội [Order of the Day on the Seventh Anniversary of the All-Nation Resistance War and the Ninth Anniversary of the Founding of the Army], *Một số văn kiện*, 216-219. Here the DRV general did not appreciate the fact that the French Union garrison at Điện Biên Phủ was actually much more weakly fortified than Nà Sản had been.
[241] Gras, 529.
[242] Võ Nguyên Giáp, 417-418.

Union made official proposals to the United States, Great Britain, and France, that "five-power" talks be held between them and, controversially, the PRC, 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 from 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 Peking in their press.[243] As historians point out, the three Western powers were not of one mind on how Communist China should be handled. The United States was generally wary of negotiating with the PRC, but France, eager to extricate itself from the war in Indochina, was interested in the possibility of talks as a means of accomplishing that much-desired goal. 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).[244] Undeterrred by this setback, Moscow continued to promote the prestige of the PRC and to campaign for a "five-power" conference at a later date to "reduce tensions throughout the world."[245]

Two days after the Soviet Union's November 3 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 "Hồ Chí Minh" about the possibility of negotiating an armistice in Indochina. It appears that the Soviet proposals for talks (and their warm reception by the PRC) had caused a change of heart in the DRV leadership about the issue of negotiations as compared with what was expressed in the August 16, 1954 editorial in *The People*. On November 29, the Swedish newspaper *Expressen* published Nguyễn Tất 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 the desire of many French politicians and people to resolve the conflict in Indochina through negotiations, Thành responded:

> If the French colonialists continue their war of aggression, then 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.[246]

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

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[243] Zhai, "China and the Geneva Conference," 107.

[244] 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 achieved finally in 1955 through the Austrian Independence Treaty of May 1955.

[245] 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."

[246] "Hồ Chủ tịch trả lời một nhà báo Thụy điển" [Chairman Hồ Responds to a Swedish Journalist], *Nhân dân* [The People], no. 152, December 6, 1953. Unable to find a copy of the original English language document given to the Swedish embassy in Peking, I have had to translate from the Vietnamese version published in *The People.*

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 a 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 fate was tied to the State of Vietnam began pressing France with renewed urgency for complete independence. They also pressured their Head of State, the former emperor, Bảo Đại, to make changes in the government that would give it a more nationalist and independent character.[247]

Toward the end of his brief letter, Nguyễn Tất Thành availed himself of the opportunity to sow dissention among and erode the popular support of his opponents in the French government, 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 [chiến sĩ hòa bình], 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.[248]

Thành's conceptualization of the situation in Vietnam and Indochina is crucial in light of the future Geneva Conference, which had yet to be agreed upon by the Great Powers. First of all, the key danger to Indochina was not the French colonialists but the American imperialists, who were waiting in the wings to take control of Indochina after a depleted France had been brushed aside. Second, French foreign policy and conduct of the war were inextricably linked with American aid whereas the DRV was apparently a completely autonomous actor (there was no mention of the relationship between the DRV and its two big allies, the Soviet Union and PRC, and no mention of DRV military incursions into Cambodia and Laos).

Third, Nguyễn Tất Thành highlighted the political complexity of France, noting its people, its "peace soldiers," and its colonialists. This was contrasted with the simplicity of Vietnam, which the DRV leader depicted as having only one people and one DRV state. (Here, it is apparent why the enormous migration of Northerners to the South following the signing of the Geneva Accords was so disturbing to the Party leaders.) Despite the fact that the VWP was, at the time, beginning land reform, its most ambitious and radical project of socialist transformation to date, Nguyễn Tất Thành made no mention in his letter to *Expressen* of ideology as a source of contention in Vietnamese political life. He conceptualized the conflict between the DRV and France as one simply between French and Vietnamese patriotism on the one side against French colonialism allied with American imperialism on the other. Thành's image of Vietnamese, Indochinese, and world politics in his November 20th letter to *Expressen* hints at some of the VWP's subsequent policy choices during and immediately following the Geneva Conference (namely the attempt to ally with France again). It also shows, as Asselin stresses, that there was

[247] Devillers and Lacouture, *The End of a War*, 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.
[248] Hồ Chí Minh, "Reply to Swedish Journalist," *Nhân dân*, December 6, 1953.

an (underappreciated) convergence of interests between the Soviet Union, PRC, and DRV with respect to the key goal of keeping America out of Indochina.

It was a fine line that Nguyễn Tất Thành and the VWP leaders had to walk with respect to how they depicted their situation to their Soviet and Chinese allies. On the one hand, America's support for the anticommunist forces in Vietnam and its steps toward direct intervention at some point in the future 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 open up the flow of weapons and aid. On the other hand, though, it was possible that this narrative would have the opposite effect on Soviet and Chinese thinking, convincing them to keep their aid at discreet levels so as not to provoke an American intervention in Indochina. (It may have been that DRV efforts with their Chinese and Soviet allies to stress American involvement in the war and promote themselves as the vanguard of the struggle against the American-led "imperialist camp" tied the hands of the VWP leaders to some extent, making it more difficult for them to complain when the Soviets and Chinese used that threat as a reason to negotiate a ceasefire at Geneva.)

The Berlin Conference: January 25-February 18, 1954

As noted earlier, the Soviet Union had been pushing hard in the fall of 1953 to raise the prestige of the PRC and to have it included in some sort of "five-power" talks aimed at "reducing tensions" around the world. Met with repeated refusals from the United States, the Soviet Union had finally backed off from this proposal momentarily and conceded in early November 1953 to the holding of four-power talks dealing specifically with the situation in Germany and Austria. This proposal resulted in the four-power Berlin Conference held from January 25 to February 18, 1954. Still determined to advocate for the PRC, the Soviet foreign minister, Vyacheslav Molotov, used his opening speech at Berlin to make another strong pitch for the Soviet goal of five-power talks.

The Berlin Conference made no headway on the issue of German reunification or Austrian neutralization. The Soviet Union continued to reject the American, British, and French proposal that Germany be reunited through free elections supervised by the four powers—a method that would obviously have resulted in the end of East Germany. And the Western powers similarly continued to reject the Soviet proposal for the unification of Vietnam (the specifics of which will be discussed presently). By making some concessions to American semantic demands,[249] however, and taking advantage of French eagerness to end the conflict in Indochina through negotiations, Molotov was, in the final week of negotiations in Berlin, able to secure

[249] The U.S. secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, insisted on inserting a clause into the Berlin Conference's final declaration that participation in the conference would not constitute recognition by the United States (directed at the PRC). Dulles also demanded that vague declarations about world peace be dropped. As he stated at the conference: "I would like to state plainly and unequivocally what the Soviet Foreign Minister already knows—the United States will not agree to join in a five-power conference with the Chinese Communist aggressors for the purpose of dealing generally with the peace of the world. The United States refuses not because, as is suggested, it denies that the regime exists or that it has power. We in the United States know that it exists and has power, because its aggressive armies joined with the North Korean aggressors to kill and wound 150,000 Americans who went to Korea with British, French, and other United Nations forces to resist that aggression…we do not refuse to deal with it where occasion requires. We did deal with it in making the Korean Armistice." As quoted in William F. Randle, *Geneva 1954: The Settlement of the Indochina War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 23.

agreement on the holding of 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. The conference would first tackle the issue of Korea and then move to the Indochina War.[250] Thus was the Geneva Conference born.

The DRV Response to the Berlin Conference and News of the Coming Geneva Conference

News of the coming Geneva Conference did not bring a smile to General Navarre, who saw his two-year plan to end the war on better terms for the France Union side as potentially being cut short. How, though, was it received by the DRV leaders? Without access to the transcripts of discussions between Nguyễn Tất Thành and other top Party leaders, an examination of the regime's public statements about the Berlin Conference will have to suffice for the time being. The VWP's main organ, *The People*, printed five articles about the conference, which, viewed together, suggest a few important things.[251] First, the DRV leaders initially made efforts in their coverage to downplay the prospect of peace talks on Indochina. The Party's newspaper did not reveal that the proposed Geneva Conference would even address the situation in Indochina until February 21. And this was done in a discreet and somewhat blasé manner clearly intended not to generate excitement or hope in *The People's* readers that Geneva Conference would bring about peace in Indochina. As the February 21 article that first revealed Indochina's place on the Geneva Conference agenda stated:

> However, from this initial victory to actually resolving international problems by means 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. As such, the people who love world peace still need to increase their vigilance, resolutely struggling even more. Only in this way can they stop those who start wars and carry out aggression, forcing them to respect the will of the people.[252]

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 actually felt about the news. Since the Soviets had promoted the talks so relentlessly, Thành may have surmised (or been directly informed) that they and the PRC leaders would be extremely eager to see a result from the negotiations— that is, an armistice in Indochina. The shape of that armistice, however, would have a lot 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 no

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[250] Ibid, 26-27.
[251] "Lập trường hòa bình của Liên-Xô trong Hội nghị Bếc-lanh" [The Soviet Union's Peaceful Agenda During the Berlin Conference], *Nhân dân* [The People], no. 163, February 1, 1954. "Hai vấn đề mấu chốt trong Hội nghị Bếc-lanh [The Berlin Conference's Two Key Issues], *Nhân dân* [The People], no. 165, February 11, 1954. N.D., "Kết quả Hội nghị Bếc-lanh [The Results of the Berlin Conference], *Nhân dân* [The People], no. 167, February 21, 1954. Nhân dân, "Hội nghị Giơ-ne, một tiến bộ nhằm cho tình hình thế giới bớt căng thẳng" [The Geneva Conference, Progress Aimed at Reducing Tensions in the World], *Nhân dân* [The People], no. 168, February 26, 1954. C.B. [Nguyễn Tất Thành], "Nói mà nghe: Hội nghị và hội nghị" [Speak and Listen: Conferences and Conferences], *Nhân dân* [The People], no. 170, March 6, 1954.
[252] "The Results of the Berlin Conference," *Nhân dân*, February 21.

doubt understood that it would be much harder to compel soldiers to risk their lives in an important final burst of bloodletting if they believed that they were only two or three months away from possibly surviving the war.

However, a declassified diplomatic message sent from the CPSU Central Committee to the CCP Central Committee on February 26, 1954, suggests that the DRV's lukewarm coverage of the Geneva Conference announcement may have reflected the actual feelings of the VWP leaders:

> CCP Central Committee:
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> We request that you convey to [Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) Prime Minister] Comrade Ho Chi Minh the process of the discussion at the foreign ministers meeting in Berlin of the representatives from the Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China, the United States, Britain, France, and other related countries holding a conference in Geneva on 26 April 1954 (which, in addition to discussing the Korea question, will also discuss the question of restoring peace in Indochina). Previously we already informed you that "other related countries" in Indochina, according to our understanding, should be the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the three puppet states: [Chief (Quốc trưởng)] Bao Dai's [State of] Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.
>
> We know that the Vietnamese friends are concerned about the convening of the Geneva Conference, and whether they will attend the conference. We believe that the CCP Central Committee will agree to our opinion.
>
> […]
>
> Communist Party of the Soviet Union[253]

DRV Anxiety over Geneva's Threat to their "Vietnam-Cambodia-Laos" Bloc

A second noteworthy aspect of the Party's coverage of the Berlin Conference and the coming Geneva Conference concerns the issue of what would happen to the DRV-supported regimes in Cambodia and Laos. Obviously, the intention of the Soviets not to invite representatives of the Khmer Issarak and the Pathet Lao to the Geneva Conference did not bode well for these DRV political projects and raised questions about the hoped for expansion of DRV interests in those neighboring countries. In fact, inviting only the "puppet regimes" of Laos and Cambodia was tantamount to informing the DRV that the Soviet Union did not support their political projects in these two neighboring countries, potentially damaging the prestige of the DRV in the eyes of their Cambodian and Laotian comrades. I think it is safe to conclude that Nguyễn Tất Thành had been given no say on this crucial decision about which Indochinese governments would be invited.

Eleven days later on March 6, the Chinese ambassador to the Soviet Union met with Molotov in Moscow and raised the issue of the Pathet Lao and the Khmer Issarak, stating that they should be invited to the conference along with the DRV to provide a "counterbalance" to the three anticommunist states "associated" with the French. If representatives of the Pathet Lao and the Khmer Issarak were not invited, they would have to come as guests of the DRV

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[253] "Telegram, Communist Party of the Soviet Union Central Committee to CCP Central Committee, via Comrade Yudin" March 26, 1954, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, CFMA, Record No. 109-00396-01. Obtained by CWIHP and translated for CWIHP by Chen Zhihong http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/111961

delegation. At the time, Molotov gave the Chinese ambassador a very non-committal answer, replying only that the issue "ought to be carefully considered."[254]

It the light of this February 26 internal communication between the two CPSU and CCP central committees and the subsequent March 6 meeting in Moscow between the PRC ambassador and Molotov, is interesting to note in *The People* the sudden insertion of the phrase "Viet-Miên-Lào" [Vietnam-Cambodia-Laos] into the newspaper's Geneva Conference coverage and a number of articles promoting the three Indochinese countries as one unit. For example, the top third of the front page of *The People's* March 6 issue had three large and equal-sized pictures of the Pathet Lao leader Prince Souphanouvong, Hồ Chí Minh, and the Cambodian Communist leader Sơn Ngọc Minh lined up in a row. The title of the article was "The Viet-Miên-Lào People Unite Tightly to Defeat the Common Enemy."[255] This sudden stress on "Vietnamese-Cambodian-Laotian" unity may be a sign that the Party leaders recognized immediately the threat that the Geneva Conference posed to the political and territorial inroads made in these neighboring countries and, in the longer run, to their party's long-held dream of turning Indochina into a federation modeled after the Soviet Union. In such a polity, the "Vietnamese working class" (i.e. the Communist Party) would play the same role as the Russian-dominated CPSU in the Soviet Union.[256] It is probably no coincidence that within a month of the Geneva Conference announcement, the DRV leaders sent a part of their army into northeastern Cambodia.[257]

The basic geographical outline of the ceasefire that was ultimately adopted by the DRV and French on July 20, 1954 bears a striking similarity to a proposal for the DRV position at Geneva written by Zhou Enlai on March 2, 1954. Titled "Preliminary Opinions on the Assessment of and Preparation for the Geneva Conference," Zhou Enlai's proposal seems to have been a response to the above-quoted Soviet message from February 26, and it does not appear to have been written with input from the Nguyễn Tất Thành. As the PRC foreign minister wrote to the Soviets:

> Regarding Indochina… we must try our best try to make sure that the Geneva Conference will not end without any result; even [if] no agreement can be reached, we still should not allow the negotiations for restoring peace in Indochina to be undermined completely, and should create a situation characterized by "negotiating while fighting," thus increasing the difficulties inside France and the contradictions between France and America, so that it will be beneficial for the people of Indochina to carry out struggles for liberation. …On the

[254] "From the Journal of Molotov: Secret Memorandum of Conversation between Molotov and PRC Ambassador Zhang Wentian" March 06, 1954, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, AVPRF f. 6, op. 13a, d. 25, II. 7. Obtained by Paul Wingrove and translated for CWIHP by Gary Goldberg. Published in CWIHP Bulletin #16. http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/112963. It is difficult to determine how Molotov and his Soviet comrades actually felt about the Pathet Lao and the Khmer Issarak. On the one hand, looking over the transcripts of conversations that he had with Phạm Văn Đồng and Zhou Enlai, the impression of Molotov that comes across is that of a supportive, respectful, flexible, and practical team player. In his communications with the British and French, Molotov steadfastly promotes the DRV position with respect to Laos and Cambodia. On the other hand, the fact remains that representatives of the Pathet Lao and Khmer Issarak were never invited.

[255] Nhân dân, "Nhân dân Việt-Miên-Lào đoàn kết chặt chẽ để chiến thắng kẻ thù chung" [The Viêt-Miên-Lao People Unite Tightly to Defeat the Common Enemy], *Nhân dân* [The People], no. 170, March 6, 1954.

[256] For a discussion of the Vietnamese Communist dream of a Federated States of Indochina, see Christopher Goscha, "Vietnam or Indochina: Contesting Concepts of Space in Vietnamese Nationalism, 1887-1954, Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Report Series, No. 28., 1995.

[257] Goscha, *Vietnam or Indochina*, 144.

> specific questions related to restoring peace in Indochina, an on-site ceasefire is not as good as a division along a demarcation line between the south and north, such as the 16th parallel. However, only through many struggles can such a favorable situation be achieved.[258]

The DRV Take on the Proposals for German Reunification

A third interesting aspect of the DRV's coverage of the Berlin Conference, particularly in light of the coming Geneva Accords, is its assessment of German reunification. An article from *The People* described the America-French-British proposal and the Soviet proposal as follows:

> When discussing the German issue, the three American, French, and British foreign ministers put forward a plan for German "unification" with the hope of fooling world opinion. They request that, before anything else, "free" elections be held throughout all of Germany under the inspection of the four countries America, Britain, France, and the Soviet Union (so that they can rig the elections). [According to them,] only after this has been done can a German government be established. Treaties can then be signed with that German government. Comrade Molotov exposed [vạch trần] this deception by the American, British, and French camp. Comrade [Molotov] stated clearly that there cannot be a free election while the American, British, and French armies continued to occupy West Germany, while the two war-starting Bonn and Paris treaties [hai hiệp ước gây chiến] are in effect, and while the West German militarists continue to strengthen their activities. Molotov requested that a referendum be organized throughout Germany so that each citizen would have the freedom to express whether he wanted to sign a peace treaty or continue with the two war-starting Bonn and Paris treaties. In order to proceed rapidly to the signing of a treaty with Germany, comrade Molotov requested that a provisional government be immediately established for all of Germany, with democratic forces participating in it.[259]

It is interesting to note that article from the *The People* made no mention of the fact that the "provisional government" proposed by Molotov was to contain equal representation from East and West Germany, despite the fact that the former had less than a third the population of the latter (about eighteen million vs. fifty million). Obviously, the DRV leaders knew full well that their Soviet allies, in order to hold on to their less populated East Germany, were rejecting "free elections." The United States, Great Britain, and France, on the other hand, were continuing to promote them, probably to make the Soviet Union appear to be rejecting democracy and the principle of national self-determination. The DRV leader's suspicious and cynical view of elections in divided Germany needs to be borne in mind as we consider how to interpret the earnest tone that they would subsequently adopt with respect to "free elections" in their own country.

About a month later, on April 4, the "Vietnam group" of the Chinese delegation attending the Geneva Conference completed a proposal for the DRV position at the Geneva Conference, whose Indochina segment would begin in a little over a month. This proposal, which must have been drafted by Nguyễn Tất Thành, was titled, "A Comprehensive Solution for Restoring Peace

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[258] "'Preliminary Opinions on the Assessment of and Preparation for the Geneva Conference,' Prepared by the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs (drafted by PRC Premier and Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai) [Excerpt]" March 02, 1954, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, CFMA, Record No. 206-Y0054. Obtained by CWIHP and translated for CWIHP by Chen Zhihong. http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/111963

[259] "The Two Key Issues at the Berlin Conference," *Nhân dân*, February 11, 1954.

in Indochina." The key words here were "comprehensive" and "Indochina," signaling Thành's intention not to let Cambodia and Laos be treated as separate issues without the input of the DRV. What is interesting, though not surprising, is the fact that this original DRV proposal was basically an adaptation to Indochina of the Soviet proposal for Germany. It called first for the departure of all foreign troops within six months. Meanwhile a "provisional joint committee" was to be formed by the six governments in Indochina along with "democratic parties and organizations in the three countries." That joint committee would then do four things: 1) guarantee democratic freedoms 2) discuss disarmament for Indochina 3) discuss plans for the restoration of economic and cultural relations 4) hold general elections for each country. In a move obviously calibrated to keep America out of Indochina, the DRV proposal stated that "the unified governments in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia should, on the basis of equality and mutual benefit, sign agreements on economic, cultural, and technological cooperation with France for the purpose of developing the economic and cultural relations between the three countries and France."[260]

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 Union 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 to them from China, they were able to quickly destroy six fighter aircraft parked by the airstrip, taking away from the French Union forces a major weapon at their disposal. 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 had rendered the airstrip virtually unusable after only two days of fighting. This left parachute drops as the only means of resupplying the French Union forces at the garrison. As is well known, 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 DRV artillery pieces were both difficult to spot and extremely accurate. Moreover, the original misunderstanding between Generals Navarre and Cogny about the purpose of the camp 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.[261] The DRV forces attacked the various hills and knolls surrounding the French garrison, making significant inroads, but suffering terrible losses themselves. Finally, on May 7, 1954, they were able to overrun the last pockets of resistance at the garrison, securing one of the most remarkable victories of the 20th Century.

In explaining the outcome of the battle, historians such as Jules Roy, Pierre Rocolle, Bernard Fall, Yves Gras, and, more recently, Martin Windrow, all stress the importance of

[260] "Draft Memorandum, 'A Comprehensive Solution for Restoring Peace in Indochina,' Prepared by the Vietnam Group of the Chinese Delegation Attending the Geneva Conference" April 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

[261] 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 months worth of round-the-clock flights).

Navarre's underestimation of the DRV's logistical capacity, particularly the ability to haul large artillery pieces into the hills surrounding the besieged garrison. Yet while recognizing the flawed logic behind the decision to create an entrenched camp/mooring point at Điện Biên Phủ, and the amazing effort of the DRV forces, these historians are nonetheless careful to stress the key role of contingency on the battle's outcome. Even after December 27, it was not necessarily a foregone conclusion that the garrison would fall, argues Gras. A combination of poor decisions, some bad luck, and a lack of solid leadership at the garrison all played a role in the French Union defeat. One crucial error, stressed by most historians, was Navarre's bizarre decision, as the siege was developing, to carry out a large operation ("Atalante") in Central Vietnam. Another issue was the ill-conceived layout of the camp's defense strong-points. The DRV cause was also helped by Navarre's decision not to do more to interrupt their long and vulnerable supply-line from China as the battle was developing. Bernard Fall stresses the importance of the 3,000 to 4,000 garrison defenders (mostly from various parts of Indochina and the world), who deserted in the middle of the battle, refusing to fight.[262]

What has been badly under-presented in these remarkable accounts of the battle is the "hell" endured by the DRV side. This is not the fault of the battle's Western historians, who no doubt would have relished an opportunity to pick through the DRV's military and Party files to better understand how the battle unfolded from their side. In Fall's classic history of the battle, however, glimpses of how difficult things were for the 45,000 DRV soldiers at Điện Biên Phủ appear here and there, mostly through intercepted DRV radio conversations and the reports of deserters. According to Fall, evidence suggests that the week of April 11-18 marked a crisis of morale for the DRV side, with "agitated" radio reports heard from DRV commanders in the field indicating that some units were refusing to obey orders. DRV prisoners of war, he writes, "openly admitted that in some instances they had been made to advance by actual threats of being shot from behind by their own guns."[263] A DRV deserter who fled to the French Union side on April 20 reported to his interrogators in the besieged garrison that about half of his original 312th Division had been replaced by "raw recruits," who were "pretty despondent" about the fight. The deserter apparently had been told by a political commissar that the attack would be continued "regardless of losses."[264]

These glimpses do not cohere with the SRV historian Dương Trung Quốc's image of DRV soldiers in the trenches receiving letters from home about the land reform and then rushing enthusiastically into battle. As he wrote in a 2007 article about the land reform for the historical journal *Past and Present:*

> But laboring peasants, poor for generations, who then received land, comprised an enormous force for a battlefield that needed their sacrifice to achieve a decisive victory. The picture of peasants wearing military uniforms sitting in a Điện Biên Phủ trench before the moment of battle, reading letters from home telling them that their families had received land, so that only a few moments later, [these soldiers] would surge forward to the enemy's battlefield positions, helps us understand to some extent the great meaning [of the land reform].[265]

[262] Ibid, 453.
[263] Ibid, 237.
[264] Ibid, 266.
[265] Dương Trung Quốc, "Over Half a Century Later, 'Land to the Tiller,'" *Xưa và nay*, 8.

Christopher Goscha, in his recently published article on the battle, is the first scholar to tackle directly the issue of the battle's terrible physical toll on the DRV side.[266] Since Vietnam's leaders today, nearly six decades after the fact, continue to use the victory as a source of legitimacy for their rule, the need also continues for them to prevent scholars from accessing information that would raise questions about or cast dark shadows upon the glorious official depiction of the battle. The continuation of this official policy presented no small challenge to Goscha in his research. However, by examining specialized SRV histories of the DRV medical effort during the war and combining these (among other sources) with a few candid accounts of the battle by medical personnel who served at Điện Biên Phủ, Goscha is able to capture some of the horror of the battle from the DRV perspective. What emerges from his account, ultimately, is normal young men (i.e. reluctant to die no matter how noble the cause) pushed by their ambitious political leaders into a World War I-style trench battle, with limbs, blood, corpses, and the dying strewn liberally about the landscape. Internal Party reports on the battle suggest that Võ Nguyên Giáp and other top Party leaders found their peasant soldiers' fears, hesitations, and sometimes outright insubordination (all referred to as "rightest deviations") to be frustrating and disappointing.

A thirty page report delivered by the Secretary of the Central Military Committee [Bí thư Tổng quân ủy], perhaps 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 Union garrison.

Comrades,

> During the last two assaults waves, we have scored major victories and forced the enemy into extremely difficult circumstances.
>
> Recently, the Politburo has recognized that those victories have "*created the basic conditions for our army to complete its mission of destroying the entirety of the enemy forces at Điện Biên Phủ. But, because our cadres have many shortcomings, mainly due to the continued presence of serious rightest deviationist thinking, these victories have been limited to some extent."*
>
> The Politburo has given the following order:
>
> *"All Party executive committees, Party members, and all cadres [involved in the battle] must make an effort to address their rightest deviationist thinking, to consolidate and increase their resolve and their sense of responsibility to the people, the army, and the Party. They must, with determination, fix their recent weaknesses and continue to completely absorb the method of striking and advancing firmly [đánh chắc, tiến chắc]. At the same time, they must zealously take advantage of time, carry out orders completely, overcome all difficulties and hardships, and fulfill their duty of gaining a complete victory for the campaign."*[267]

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[266] 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" [Dien Bien Phu: The Military Losses], *La Bataille de Dien Bien Phu, entre histoire et memoire: 1954-2004* [The Battle of Dien Bien Phu: Between History and Memory: 1954-2004] (Paris: Publications de la Societe Francaise d'Histoire d'Outre-Mer, 2004), 147-168.

[267] Bí thư Tổng quân ủy [Secretary of the Central Military Committee], "Kiên quyết đấu tranh chống tư tưởng tiêu cực, xây dựng tinh thần tích cực cách mạng và tinh thần triệt để chấp hành mệnh lệnh, bảo đảm toàn thắng cho chiến dịch" [Resolutely Struggle against Negative Rightist Deviationist Thinking, Construct a Spirit of Revolutionary Zeal

Later, the report provided more specifics about what sort of actions the menace of "negative rightist deviationist thinking" caused among commander and soldiers on the battlefield. 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 [tiêu hao], and submission to fatigue [mệt mỏi]. Standing before these difficulties, [cadres] lack the resolve to overcome them. With respect to the enemy, [cadres] lack a spirit of zealously destroying 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. There is a good battle position but [cadres and soldiers] do not want to exploit it to destroy the enemy. They are not interested in [không tha thiết về] the victory of the campaign, in the improvement of the army, and in the benefit to the revolution, to the Party, and to the people.[268]

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 because they worry that it will turn up difficulties that need to be resolved; they are afraid that they will have to confront the issue of fighting 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, is a major accomplishment. As a result of this, they do not continue to resolutely struggle. That is 'half-assed' [nửa vời] revolution, which means not revolution.[269]

Did the prospect of land reform make the 45,000 soldiers who fought at Điện Biên Phủ "extremely enthusiastic"? As noted earlier, this was what the Party leaders wanted, and they took pains to create the impression that it had happened by ordering intellectuals to produce dozens of fictional accounts describing soldiers responding to the land reform in this way. But we simply cannot take the official DRV line on this issue at face value. During the land reform, for example, the Party's propaganda always stated that the people enthusiastically welcomed land reform teams to their villages. Yet virtually every one of the major accounts of the campaign produced after Đổi Mới [New Change] in 1986 suggests the exact opposite—that the arrival of a land reform team in a commune filled the majority of the residents with anxiety, not enthusiasm.[270] The Party leaders claimed publicly that the peasants "enthusiastically" handed over their rice for the agricultural tax, yet internal documents show that this was not usually the

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and the Absolute Implementation of Orders, Guarantee Complete Victory for the Campaign], *Một số Văn kiện Chỉ đạo*, 2004, 543-544.

[268] Ibid, 550-551.

[269] Ibid, 551.

[270] See, for example, Ngô Ngọc Bội's *Ác mọng* [Nightmare], Tô Hoài's *Ba người khác* [Three Others], along with memoir accounts of the campaign.

case. Basically, the DRV leaders made sure that their press organs depicted the Vietnamese people as responding enthusiastically to all policies, whether this was the case or not. Moreover, the Party had been distributing land since taking power in late 1945, and the land reform itself had already been propagandized to soldiers for months by the time the battle began in March, yet knowledge of the campaign did not prevent the mid-April crisis of morale on the DRV side. Why, then, would land reform propaganda suddenly be powerful enough to pull soldiers out of the crisis?

When the Geneva Conference began on April 26, the victory of the DRV at Điện Biên Phủ seems to have been all but guaranteed, with the only realistic threat to this outcome being some sort of massive American bombing raid. The Eisenhower administration considered such a raid, and even sketched out a tentative plan for how it might be carried out ("Operation Vulture"), but, among other things, the needed public and Congressional support for such a bold step was lacking and could not be generated in time to save the French Union garrison. Robert F. Randle speculates convincingly in his analysis of the diplomatic exchanges between the representatives of the U.S., France, and Great Britain (Dulles, Bidault, and Eden) that Dulles' outward eagerness to help the French at Điện Biên Phủ and to internationalize the war was feigned. Randle sees Dulles and Eisenhower as having wanted to avoid intervention the whole time, with the former playing diplomatic games, for both foreign and domestic political reasons, to shift the blame for lack of U.S. intervention onto the British.[271]

The DRV victory at Điện Biên Phủ greatly strengthened their position at Geneva, in large part by sending a pulse of panic and despair through French political life, which gave more significance to the defeat than it merited, "as though [France were] trying to drown its errors in a sea of grief."[272] The taking of 10,000 prisoners from the battle was also helpful to the DRV cause. Nguyễn Tất Thành and the VWP leaders 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 as they marched back to the Red River delta.[273]

Meanwhile, there was the pressing issue of how to evacuate the critically wounded soldiers at the garrison who could not march. It is interesting to note that a couple of key themes of the land reform—class and revenge—were soon brought into play by DRV commissars charged with overseeing the treatment and evacuation of the wounded at Điện Biên Phủ. As Fall describes:

> In the meantime, the pressures had also mounted inside the camp, as Viet-Minh political commissars began to take their own doctors in hand. The wounded were "reclassified" according to what was called their "democratic urgency" rather than their medical urgency, with the non-Europeans of the lowest ranks being given preferred medical treatment over the European soldiers, and the latter being treated earlier or better than their noncommissioned officers and officers.[274]

As for wounded Vietnamese soldiers who had fought on the French Union side at Điện Biên Phủ as members of the Vietnamese National Army, the DRV leaders refused to let the French

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[271] Randle, *Geneva 1954*, 98-101. Randle's take on John Foster Dulles, frequently depicted as a bellicose hawk, is one of the most controversial and interesting aspects of his book. The more common interpretation of Dulles may be found in Devillers and Lacouture's account, *The End of a War*, on page 79.
[272] Devillers and Lacouture, *The End of a War*, 171.
[273] Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place*, 427.
[274] Ibid, 429.

medical mission evacuate them. It is possible that this was due to a desire to exact revenge on these "traitors," as Fall understandably suggests.

However, I suspect that Nguyễn Tất Thành and the VWP Politburo instructed cadres charged with handling the situation to stick closely to the narrative of the land reform. This meant that the behavior of all Vietnamese had to be attributed to class. Thus a poor peasant who fought on the side of the State of Vietnam was not actually a traitor but a member of the masses who had been duped or forced into serving his class enemy. The Party leaders did not recognize agency for poor peasants who sided against them, whereas those peasants who did fight on their side always did so on an entirely voluntary basis. Also, to allow the French to evacuate wounded Vietnamese defenders of the garrison would allow the French to seem as though they cared about their own wounded Vietnamese soldiers as much or more than the DRV side cared about theirs.[275] Not allowing the French medical mission to evacuate their side's wounded Vietnamese can be seen as a 'false confession' forced upon the French to make them affirm the VWP's official narrative of how French imperialists were supposed to behave. These false confessions also took the form of letters that the VWP leaders forced captured French medical personnel at Điện Biên Phủ to write, extolling Hồ Chí Minh for his clemency toward the French prisoners, or promising to promote peace back in France, or in some way affirming the image of the DRV and the characterization of the war that the Party leaders desired.[276]

The Indochina Session of the Geneva Conference Begins

The section of the Geneva Conference devoted to negotiating a ceasefire in the Indochina conflict 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 ending just as the talks began, two important subsequent battles taking place during the conference, key actors coming and going, a French government changing mid-way through, and with different levels of negotiations taking place contemporaneously, make pithy descriptions of the conference difficult.[277] The most high-profile negotiators were arguably Vyacheslav 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 Camobdia), and others.

The French Ceasefire Proposal: May 8, 1954

The French foreign minister, Georges Bidault, laid out his government's ceasefire proposal on May 8, the opening day of the Indochina negotiations. As we saw above, the earliest DRV proposal for a position at the Geneva Conference was titled, "A Comprehensive Solution for Restoring Peace in Indochina," and dated April 4, 1954—over a month before the DRV victory at Điện Biên Phủ, but far enough along in the battle to know that a victory was the most

[275] The VWP leaders were insecure about how inadequate their medical aid was at Điện Biên Phủ. A DRV doctor who served at the battle recounted years later being put on trial during the fighting, no doubt forced by cadres to confess that the difficulties were mostly his own fault rather than that of the VWP leaders.
[276] Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place*, 429-430.
[277] Much has been written about the Geneva Conference. For those interested in learning more about the conference, I recommend starting with the following two books: Phillipe Devillers and Jean Lacouture, *The End of a War: Indochina 1954* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1969); Robert F. Randle, *Geneva 1954: The Settlement of the Indochinese War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969).

likely outcome.[278] (It appears that this proposal was never publicized but rather formed the basis from which the official DRV proposal, presented over a month later on May 10 at the conference by Phạm Văn Đồng, was written.)

When the negotiations on Indochina began on May 8, the French foreign minister, Georges Bidault presented his proposal for a ceasefire first:

I
For Vietnam

1. The grouping of regular units in zones of assembly, to be determined by the conference on proposals from the Commanders in Chief.
2. The disarmament of elements which do not belong either to the army or to forces in charge of maintaining order.
3. Immediate liberation of war prisoners and civilian internees.
4. The control of the execution of these clauses by international commissions.
5. Cessation of hostilities with the signatures of this agreement. The re-assembly of troops and the disarmament cited above, provided for in the five points, would begin, at the lastest, [number to be decided], days after the signing of the accord.

II
For Cambodia and Laos

1. Evacuation of all regular and irregular forces under Vietminh that have invaded the countries.
2. The disarmament of elements that do not belong to either the army or the forces in charge of maintaining order.
3. The immediate liberation of war prisoners and civilian internees.
4. The control of the execution of these clauses by international commissions.

III

The guarantee of these accords would be assured by the member states of the Geneva conference. Any violation would call for immediate consultation among these member states with a view to taking appropriate measures, individually or collectively.[279]

In his official statement, Bidault elaborated on a few key items in the French plan. First of all, he insisted that the situations in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia were "not identical" and therefore needed to be handled differently. This clearly contradicted the DRV's "Vietnam-Cambodia-Laos" narrative, which stressed the unity of the three Indochinese countries based on the common experience of French colonialism. With respect to Laos and Cambodia, Bidault argued: "Here there is not civil war, but an invasion without motive, which, in addition,

[278] "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
[279] "Excerpts from Bidault Statement and Text of Plan," *The New York Times*, May 9, 1954.

constitutes a menace to neighboring nations. The solution, therefore, is to agree on withdrawal of the invaders and reestablishment of territorial integrity."

Two aspects of Bidault's May 8 proposal had direct implications for the land reform. The first was the idea that "guarantees" would be necessary to "preserve the security of the troops of the parties involved and to shelter civilian populations from abusive exploitation." This appears to be the original formulation of what would eventually turn into the "no reprisals" clause (article 14c) of the final agreement. A similar idea does appear in the DRV's proposal of April 4, which talked of the need to "guarantee…the rights of democracy and freedom" for the peoples of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. As was typical of Western notions of democracy, the French formulation spoke in negative terms of what the state (this is the implication, in my opinion) was not allowed to do to civilians. The DRV formulation, as was typical of the Communist discourse on democracy, made no mention of the state and spoke in positive terms of what the people would be allowed to do (enjoy democratic freedoms). However one interpreted the French proposal, clearly it was intended to prevent just the sort of activities that comprised the land reform (the identification of certain civilians as traitors or spies, the expropriation of their property, and the carrying out of other punitive measures against them such as imprisonment or execution).

The second aspect of Bidault's proposal that had direct implications for the land reform was the demand for "international commissions" to guarantee the implementation of the ceasefire agreements. The DRV's April 4 proposal had, like the Soviet proposal for Germany, envisioned the departure of all foreigners from Indochina before the "provisional joint committee" set about such tasks as holding elections for the three three countries. The French proposal for "international supervision" suggested that members of capitalist, anti-communist countries be given the right to observe the internal affairs of the DRV state. The land reform, which Nguyễn Tất Thành had described as "democratic," would surely not be seen that way by non-communist observers, who still adhered to the "old" conception of democracy.

The DRV Proposal at Geneva: May 10, 1954

On May 10, two days after Bidault made his proposal, Phạm Văn Đồng presented the DRV's first official proposal at the conference. It had eight points and stated in even more explicit terms than had Bidault that "the belligerent sides undertake not to prosecute persons who collaborated with the other side during the war." However, with respect to the issue of how this would be monitored, the DRV proposal rejected the French idea of an "international commission," proposing instead the establishment of "mixed commissions" in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, "composed of the representatives of the belligerent sides." Since the DRV denied that it had troops in Cambodia and Laos, presumably "belligerent sides" meant representatives of the Pathet Lao, the Kingdom of Laos, the Khmer Issarak, and the Kingdom of Cambodia in those two countries. Whether this was supposed to include the French is unclear. Indeed, the DRV proposal, mirroring the tactic of the French, refused to mention by name the three non-communist regimes in Indochina. The Soviets, who had made the decision (probably at French insistence during the Berlin Conference) to invite the "three puppet regimes" in Indochina and exclude the Pathet Lao and Khmer Issarak, appear to have given Nguyễn Tất Thành and the DRV considerable leeway to promote these two revolutionary groups at Geneva.

In light of the VWP's internal discourse on the land reform, which stressed the primacy of class struggle and the importance of land reform as a transitional step toward agricultural

collectivization, it is worth noting that the DRV's public conceptualization of the political situation in Indochina studiously avoided any mention of communism or the notion that there were real divisions along ideological lines among the people of Indochina. The French had characterized the situation in Vietnam as a "civil war." The DRV leaders would, as they had from the beginning, continue to shape their discourse carefully so that their side represented true nationalism in Vietnam (no mention of communism) while all their internal opponents were simply traitors (never anticommunists). Similarly, a rank-and-file DRV cadre who read nothing but *The People* would not know that the United States was "anticommunist" and had a policy of "containment."

Trouble Spots in the Negotiations

The negotiations bogged down quickly over a few key issues. The first, as seen above, was the issue of Cambodian and Laotian neutralization (i.e. 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, as seen above, 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 comprise it. What combination of countries would be acceptable to both sides?

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."[280]

One of the reasons why 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. As we saw, Zhou Enlai's original proposal from March 2 had put forward as a goal the 16th parallel, 333 kilometers to the north of 13th parallel. The difference between the DRV proposal and the French proposal 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.

Controversies Related to the DRV and the Geneva Accords

The historical disputes and gray areas related to the Geneva Accords mostly deal with two things related to the DRV side. The first, as noted earlier, is the question of how the top

[280] John W. Holmes, "Review of Robert F. Randle's *Geneva 1954: The Settlement of the Indochinese War*," *The International Journal*, vol. 25, no. 4, autumn 1970, 786-788.

DRV leaders felt about the help they received from the Soviet Union and the PRC during the negotiations. The second concerns the question of what the overall strategy of the DRV leaders was after the accords had been signed. In the remainder of this chapter, we will look at some of the evidence concerning the first controversy, saving the second controversy for the next chapter.

As noted earlier, most historians consider the DRV to have been the losers at Geneva, having been deprived at the negotiating table of territory they had earned on the battlefield, with "great pressure"[281] from the Soviet and PRC to blame. People have come to this conclusion for a few different reasons. First of all, in addition to looking at the disproportionately greater DRV compromise on the demarcation line, they have looked at French military maps on which were indicated those regions of the country thought to be under firm DRV control, those regions under contention, and those regions firmly under French control. In the eyes of the French military, the DRV appears to have had control over considerably more than half of the country, which was what the division of the country at the 17th parallel ultimately gave them. The French argued—not without reason—that the smaller areas under their control in the North (Hà Nội, Hải Phòng, and a heavily populated and productive chunk of the Red River delta) were of at least comparable value to the sections of territory in Central Vietnam that the DRV would be giving up through partition. Another piece of evidence that appears to affirm the Soviet and Chinese pressure theory is the fact that Zhou Enlai depicted himself to the British foreign secretary, Anthony Eden, as a moderate 'honest broker' who was doing all he could behind the scenes to convince the more ambitious DRV to lower their requirements.[282]

A third source of information that seems to affirm this viewpoint is retrospective statements of both DRV and PRC leaders. The historian Mari Olsen, for example, notes a 1968 conversation between Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, and Phạm Văn Đồng during which the PRC leader stated that Nguyễn Tất 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.[283]

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 a ceasefire, with 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 Nguyễn Tất 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

[281] Chen Jian and Shen Zhihua, "The Geneva Conference of 1954: New Evidence from the Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, Issue 16,
[282] "Minutes of Conversation between Zhou Enlai and Anthony Eden" July 13, 1954, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, CFMA Record No. 206-Y0006. Obtained by CWIHP and translated for CWIHP by Zhao Han. http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/111069. In his conversation with Eden, Zhou Enlai implies that he convinced Hồ Chí Minh to give some ground with respect to the terms of the agreement. But a skeptic could always question whether Zhou Enlai was merely trying to give Eden the impression of having done him a favor.
[283] Mari Olsen, *Soviet-Vietnam Relations and the Role of China, 1949-1964: Changing Alliances* (New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2006), 46.

> 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. […]
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> 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."[284]

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 general-secretary, Lê Duẩn's) 1979 "White Paper" on relations with the PRC.[285] The political tract blamed the CCP for the (retrospectively bad) settlement for the DRV at Geneva, interpreting the PRC's supposedly uninspired advocacy of DRV interests at the conference as an early sign of 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 actual battle with the PRC over influence in Indochina at the time, twenty-five years after the Geneva Conference, which had resulted in the short and bloody border war between the two countries from February 17 to March 16, 1979. At that time, the Soviet Union was the key ally of the SRV against the PRC, so it not surprising that none of the retrospective blame was placed on the shoulders of the Soviet Union.

In my view, none of these retrospective assessments of the Geneva Accords by Mao Zedong (1968), Khrushchev (1968), or Lê Duẩn (1979), can be seen as proving definitively how the DRV leaders felt about the accords at the time. It is a normal tendency of politicians to rethink or re-remember the past according to political imperatives of the present. This was especially the case with Communist leaders, whose right to rule was based on their knowledge and application of a doctrine that supposedly had a scientific character, that enabled its practitioners to predict the future.[286]

Both Pierre Asselin and Christopher Goscha, in recent scholarship dealing with or touching upon the Geneva Accords, present evidence from internal VWP documents published in the *Party Documents* series that seems to lend support to Khrushchev's characterization of the DRV. One of their most important pieces of evidence is a speech that Trường Chinh delivered during a meeting of the Party Central Committee held from July 15-17, 1954. It is important to note that this meeting was held 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

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[284] Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers, volume 3: Statesman [1953-1956]* [University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007], 500-501.

[285] *The Truth about Vietnam-China Relations over the Last Thirty Years*, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 1979.

[286] The practice still goes on today in Vietnam, with controversial political characters having been removed in places from the historical record. The high-ranking dissident general, Trần Độ, for example, has clearly been removed from places where his name appeared in old Party documents. Another example is the Vietnamese translation of Larry Berman's *The Perfect Spy*, in which an old picture containing the Party dissident, Bùi Tín, has been cut out of a picture in Berman's book. Sometimes, the Party censors work the other way around, adjusting present reality so that it does not raise questions about a difficult-to-deny fact of the past. In the Vietnamese translation of Miranda Twiss' pop-history book, *The Most Evil Dictators in History*, on sale in Hanoi bookstores, the entry on Stalin has been removed and his picture 'photo-shopped' off of the front cover.

before the July 20 deadline.[287] As Chinh explained to members of Party Central Committee at that 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 [mới xấp xỉ].[288]

In other words, a roughly equal division of Vietnam between the forces of the French Union and those of the DRV was an accurate reflection of 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 party to "justify" the soon-to-be signed Geneva Accords to members of the Central Committee, to make his comrades see the terms of the accords in a positive light.[289] At that time, reasons of faith still required the VWP leaders to 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 certainly no accident that, in the July 16 issue of *The People*, only four days before the accords were signed, the editors 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). My guess is that this was a way of suggesting to Party members that the soon-to-be-announced partition of the country was based more or less on the reality of how the fighting had gone. The vast 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, as their maps indicated the division of the country into regions of political control. The fact that the DRV published in *The People* a map of battles rather than a map of political control suggests an attempt on their part to make the balance of forces in Vietnam seem more even than it actually was.

Another argument, which can be inferred to some extent from Goscha's study of Điện Biên Phủ, is that previous scholars have not fully appreciated the extent of the losses suffered by

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[287] 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 prime-ministership 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 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.

[288] *VKDTT 1954*, 174.

[289] Christopher Goscha, "The Revolutionary Laos of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam," in *The Failure of Peace in Indochina: 1954-1962* (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2010), 68.

the DRV forces in their effort to win the battle. If the French estimate of 22,000 DRV casualties is roughly correct (and it may yet be low), it means that the DRV lost the equivalent of over 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. As can be gathered from this study's description of the terrible economic situation of the DRV-controlled areas, I tend to agree with the spirit of Goscha's argument and Khrushchev's retrospective assessment (that is, of the DRV as a victorious but dangerously exhausted fighter) rather than the picture of awesome strength depicted, for example, by Devillers and Lacouture in their account.

The Final Two Battles of the War and their Possible Impact on the Geneva Negotiations

I also believe that not enough emphasis has been placed on the final two battles that occurred during the last two months of the Geneva negotiations, particularly on how they might have affected the way the DRV leaders saw their negotiating position and the final settlement. The first was the Battle of An Khê (sometimes referred to as the Battle of Mang Yang Pass). This occurred when the inexperienced French general, Paul Ely, who had been sent to Indochina to stabilize the situation after the fall of Điện Biên Phủ, insisted that a 2,500 person French Union garrison at An Khê (located in the Central Highlands) was in danger of becoming a second, if smaller, Điện Biên Phủ. He ordered that the garrison be evacuated along Route 19 toward the provincial capital, Pleiku. The DRV leaders got wind of the plan and set up a deadly ambush for the French Union convoy. According to Bernard Fall, the DRV forces attacked the column three times, on June 24, 28, and 29, killing 500, wounding 600, and capturing 800 of the 2,500-man garrison.[290] The timing of this battle in the Central Highlands closely corresponds to the hardening of the DRV stance at Geneva, when the formerly malleable DRV military negotiator Tạ Quang Biểu suddenly stated on June 28 to his French counterparts that the DRV wanted a division of the country at the 13th parallel.[291] Devillers and Lacouture attribute this ambitious counteroffer to a desire to test the mettle of the new French Prime Minister, Mendes-France. That may have been a factor, but I suspect that the DRV victory along Route 19 in the Central Highlands was more influential.

With the negotiations at an impasse, Zhou Enlai left Geneva on a whirlwind trip back to Beijing, with stops in Moscow, Rangoon, Delhi, and the Chinese city of Liuzhou near the Vietnamese border.[292] There Zhou Enlai met from July 3-5 with Nguyễn Tất Thành, Võ Nguyên Giáp, Hoàng Văn Hoan (the DRV ambassador to the PRC), Luo Guibo (the head of the PRC's Vietnam Advisory Group), Wei Guoqing (head of the PRC's Military Advisory Group to the DRV), Chen Manyuan (governor of Guanxi province), and Xie Fang (PRC military advisor to the VWP). It was at this meeting that the PRC foreign minister apparently convinced Thành to give some ground on his demands so that an agreement could be signed.[293]

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[290] Bernard Fall, *Street Without Joy* (

[291] Devillers and Lacouture, *The End of a War*, 260-261.

[292] "Minutes of Conversation between Zhou Enlai and Anthony Eden" July 13, 1954, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, CFMA Record No. 206-Y0006. Obtained by CWIHP and translated for CWIHP by Zhao Han. http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/111069

[293] "Telegram, Zhou Enlai to Mao Zedong, Liu Shaoqi and the CCP Central Committee, 'A Brief Report on the Meetings at Liuzhou'" July 03, 1954, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, CFMA Record No. 206-00049-03 (1). Obtained by CWIHP and translated for CWIHP by Chen Zhihong. http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/111056

As no scholar has ever been able to look at documentation from that meeting in Liuzhou, the nature of those discussions should still be seen as an open question, with retrospective accounts of them treated with skepticism. In light of the continuing sensitivity of this issue for the two parties of Vietnam and China, it is significant that the diplomatic telegrams released by the PRC archives stop with Zhou Enlai's July 4 report to Mao Zedong after two days of meetings, before the final decisions had been made on the third day, July 5. As Zhou Enlai wrote:

> Yesterday evening and today I made a report on the experiences at the Geneva Conference, and I have raised some questions that are awaiting solutions. The report is composed of six parts:
>
> 1. The current situation and our tasks;
> 2. The question concerning peace and war;
> 3. Peaceful settlement plans for Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia;
> 4. The question of negotiation—including policies, procedures, timing, and supervision;
> 5. The policies and tactics of the Vietnamese Workers Party in the future and the tendencies that are in need of attention;
> 6. The question of arranging work for the future.
>
> About the above questions, [we] have had individual conversations and have had preliminary exchanges of opinions [with the Vietnamese].
>
> Comrade Dinh [Nguyễn Tất Thành] says that regarding plans of settlement, arrangements for future military operations, and arrangements on other work, the Vietnamese comrades and Comrades Wei [Guoqing] and Luo [Guibo] will work to make preparations, and we should be able to reach decision after another day of meeting tomorrow. Regarding the various inquiries from Geneva, the responses should be made after tomorrow's meeting. The return to Beijing has been postponed for one day, and the date is changed to the 6th. So this special report.[294]

It seems likely that Zhou Enlai would have sent a report to Mao Zedong on the results of the crucial final meeting held on July 5, despite the fact that the PRC foreign minister was scheduled to return to Beijing the following day. Assuming this to be the case, one wonders whether that report from Zhou on the final decisions of the Liuzhou meeting was withheld by the archives because of things said by him about his Vietnamese comrades—or because Zhou's report (if one actually exists) makes the PRC look like poor advocates of the DRV cause at the Geneva Conference.

Perhaps even more intriguing is that fact that Zhou Enlai had asked Nguyễn Tất Thành at Liuzhou about the "policies and tactics of the Vietnamese Workers Party in the future." Depending on how candid Thành had been with the group, and assuming that Zhou had actually sent a report to Mao Zedong on the evening of July 5 about the final decisions made that day, it is possible that an image of the overall DRV strategy moving forward would emerge from that document. Such a document might provide answers to questions about how Thành actually

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[294] "Telegram, Zhou Enlai to Mao Zedong, Liu Shaoqi and the CCP Central Committee, 'A Brief Report on the Meetings at Liuzhou'" July 04, 1954, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, CFMA Record No. 206-00049-03 (1). Obtained by CWIHP and translated for CWIHP by Chen Zhihong. http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/111058

viewed the Geneva Accords. Did he ever take seriously the prospect of elections? What did he think about the issue of neutrality for Laos and Cambodia?[295] What about the ban on the import of weapons from foreign countries? Did the DRV leader think that there was real hope of establishing an alliance with France as a means of keeping the United States out of Indochina? And what had been said at the meeting about the land reform? Would the DRV be going forward with that campaign, which was still in its early stages, even with all the complications and dislocations that the ceasefire would bring about?

As we saw from Zhou Enlai's March 2, 1954, proposal for the Geneva Conference, he believed that the DRV should adopt a policy of "negotiating while fighting." Two days after the conclusion of the July 3-5 Liuzhou meeting, the DRV leaders began one last attack on the French Union forces, this time in the Red River delta. From July 7-20, in four different regions around the delta, the DRV forces surged against their demoralized French Union opponents.[296] This final confrontation took place in flat open terrain that played to the strengths of the French Union forces. The DRV forces were defeated decisively by the French Union troops. As Yves Gras explains:

> [The French Union forces] had lost their spearhead, the eleven parachute and Foreign Legion battalions of Điện Biên Phủ. Their units were heterogenous, poorly led, and poorly prepared for mobile operations. They fought in an atmosphere of defeatism heavily weighted by the negotiations at Geneva, the political effervescence that was agitating Hanoi, the flagging morale of the [State of] Vietnam army, and the fear of a general insurrection. The success which these [French Union forces] attained in that last month of the war underlined the superiority of the expeditionary corps on a terrain where it could use its means. It showed also that the defeat at Điện Biên Phủ had not diminished the resolve of the corps' combatants.[297]

It may be that this final defeat during the last thirteen days of negotiations changed the complexion of the military situation for the DRV leaders, reminding them of how difficult it would have been for them to dislodge the French Union forces from their strongholds in the Red River delta, Hà Nội, and Hải Phòng. It is possible that this final battle had made the VWP leaders more appreciative of what they were about to gain at Geneva, and made more credible Trường Chinh's July 15 statement to the Central Committee that the balance of forces between the DRV and their opponents, though certainly continuing to trend strongly toward the DRV side, was still, even after Điện Biên Phủ, "only more or less even."

The Geneva Accords

In accordance with the French, British, and American demands and against the will of the DRV, the Geneva Accords resulted in three separate agreements for the three countries of Indochina. I will summarize what I see as the key points for each of the three agreements:[298]

Vietnam

[295] For an account of how the DRV leaders circumvented the issue of Laotian neutrality, see Goscha's, "The Revolutionary Laos of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam" in *The Failure of Peace in Indochina*.
[296] Gras, *History of the Indochina War*, 574. These regions were Sơn Tây, Vĩnh Yên, Hưng Yên, and Lục Nam.
[297] Ibid.
[298] My selections represent an abbreviated version of Robert F. Randle's basic outline of the key provisions of the Geneva Accords. See Randle, *Geneva 1954*, 346-349.

1. Demarcation at the 17th parallel.
2. Withdrawal of military forces to respective sides of the 17th parallel within 300 days. French withdrawal from Hà Nội in 80 days.
3. General elections in July 1956.
4. Both signatories guarantee democratic freedoms of all Vietnamese, with neither party carrying out reprisals against people for their activities during the war.
5. For a period of 300 days, all Vietnamese are permitted to move across the 17th parallel to the other zone.
6. No new military bases in Vietnam, no introduction of foreign troops or arms.
7. Supervision of accords to be carried out by the ICC, composed of Polish, Candian, and Indian representatives, with India serving as chairman.
8. ICC recommendations (to the nine signatories of the Geneva Accords) on violations of the agreement by either party had to be approved by the unanimous vote of the three ICC members.

Laos

1. Withdrawal of DRV troops within 120 days.
2. Pathet Lao soldiers to regroup to Sam Neua and Phong Saly provinces and suffer no reprisals or discrimination from the Royal Laotian government.
3. French allowed to maintain two small military bases (3,500 men maximum).
4. French allowed to provide no more than 1,500 military trainers for the Royal Laotian Army.
5. Royal Laotian Government allowed to import only a limited number of weapons for strictly defensive purposes.
6. No foreign military bases as long as security not threatened.
7. No participation in military alliances except in cases when national security is directly threatened.
8. Elections in 1955.
9. ICC monitoring as in Vietnam and Cambodia.

Cambodia

1. All DRV and French Union troops out of Cambodia within 90 days.
2. Khmer Issarak forces to be demobilized, protected from reprisals, integrated into national community.
3. Elections in 1955.
4. No foreign military bases as long as security is not threatened.
5. Foreign military aid only permitted for defensive purposes.
6. ICC monitoring like Vietnam and Laos.

Of all the articles of Vietnam's ceasefire agreement, the one that probably caused the DRV leaders the most short-term pain was the one guaranteeing all Vietnamese people freedom of movement for 300 days. The DRV representatives at Geneva had haggled over the composition of the ICC, the neutralization of Laos and Cambodia, the timing of the general

elections, and, of course, the positioning of the demarcation line. In my reading of the accounts of the Geneva negotiations and the recently released PRC and Soviet diplomatic documents related to the conference, I have found no sign that the issue of freedom of movement was ever discussed by the DRV leaders as something potentially disadvantageous to their side. The possibility that hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese peasants in the communist North would leave for the non-communist South seems never to have occurred to Nguyễn Tất Thành and the other top Party leaders.[299]

In the next chapter, we will look at how the DRV leaders adjusted their land reform campaign to the special conditions of the Geneva Accords. Certainly, as we have seen, the campaign was incompatible with conditions of "free movement" and the guarantee of "no reprisals." Yet the DRV leaders kept the campaign going nonetheless and, remarkably, were still able to convince more than one observer that their side strictly complied with the Geneva Accords.

[299] As John Prados points out, the final numbers far exceeded the estimates of the French and Americans. Yet it seems that Ngô Đình Diệm and his administration, in July 1954 when the accords were signed, were already predicting that the number of emigres would be somewhere in the vicinity of one million people. See Prados, "The Numbers Game: How Many Vietnamese Fled South in 1954?" *The VVA Veteran*, January-February, 2005.

Chapter 5

The Period of the "300 days"

The signing of the Geneva Accords on July 20, 1954, and the release of the conference's "Final Declaration" the following day, marked the end of a revolutionary stage for the VWP leaders. They were now the internationally recognized leaders of the northern half of the country.[300] The "Democratic Republic of Vietnam" had suddenly been transformed from an idea into a definite geographic entity that was reflected in its new, informal name, "North Vietnam." The VWP leaders could consider that the "bourgeois democratic" phase of Lenin's two-stage formula had been completed in this new political entity. As stipulated by the Geneva Accords, within 300 days, the French Union military forces were to evacuate the North, regrouping to the South, which would increasingly be referred to as "South Vietnam." Vietnamese political leaders connected with the anticommunist State of Vietnam, whose power had been enabled to a large extent by the French military presence, would obviously be heading south as well, leaving the VWP leaders as the unchallenged masters of the North. 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.

In the last chapter, we looked at the process that led to the holding of the Geneva Conference and considered the question of whether the DRV leaders had been put under "great pressure" by their Soviet and PRC allies to give ground to French demands at Geneva. I argued that recent research by Pierre Asselin and Christopher Goscha, along with evidence presented in this study, has raised questions about the validity of this standard assessment. There were good reasons why the DRV leaders might have welcomed a ceasefire at the time (the spread of famine conditions, the generally exhausted state of the rural population, the high cost in casualties that the victory at Điện Biên Phủ had inflicted, and the possibility that a ceasefire might keep the United States out of Indochina). The DRV leaders would have much preferred a demarcation line at the 16th parallel or lower, but an advantage of the 17th parallel was that it made the two Vietnams seem roughly equal in size to the outside world. North Vietnam had about thirteen million people while South Vietnam had about eleven million. This relative parity between the two halves would be helpful to DRV propaganda goals, giving the Party leaders options not available to the PRC in its struggle over Taiwan. If, at the Geneva Conference, the DRV had won two thirds of the country, as a division along the 13th parallel would have given them, people in the West might have viewed South Vietnam and its rejection of the proposed 1956 elections in a different light.

In this chapter, we will look at the second of the two big questions surrounding the Geneva Accords: how were they handled by the Party leaders moving forward? Publicly, Nguyễn Tất Thành, Trường Chinh, Phạm Văn Đồng, and other top VWP leaders embraced the accords as a great victory for the Vietnamese people, propagandized hard for implementation of

[300] The 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.

the accords, and advertised the DRV as strict adherents of them. Did the public image of adherence, however, correspond to internal reality? The historian George Herring, in his classic, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, speaks of Washington and Saigon using "alleged North Vietnamese truce violations" to justify their rejection of the national elections called for by the Geneva Accords (with the key word being "alleged").[301] Edwin Moise, in his 1982 account of the DRV land reform, is more circumspect on this issue. He points 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 wonders why the International Control Commission (ICC) 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 argues.[302]

The period of the "300 days," which forms the timeframe of this chapter, refers to the period of "free movement" immediately following the signing of the Geneva Accords when all Vietnamese were to be allowed by both governments in Hà Nội and Saigon to move freely north or south across the 17th parallel to live under the regime of their liking. The period of the 300 days was closely tied to the Geneva Accords' article 14c on "no reprisals," which strictly forbade either regime from carrying out reprisals or discrimination 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 actual text from the Geneva Accords:

> Article 2: The period within which the movement of all forces of either party into its regrouping zone on either side of the provisional military demarcation line shall be completed and shall not exceed three hundred (300) days from the date of the present Agreement's entry into force.
>
> 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 of "free movement" for two (agonizing) additional months until July 20. Nevertheless, I will sacrifice accuracy for familiarity and stick with the generally used term "300 days" to describe this year-long period. According to Peter Hansen, at least 810,000 Northerners, three quarters of whom were Catholics, emigrated to the South during the this period of free movement.[303] Concern among the DRV leaders that fear of the land reform might convince even more people to flee the North convinced them to adjust

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[301] George Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986 (second ed.)], 55.
[302] Moise, *Land Reform*, 192-193.
[303] Peter Hansen, "Bắc di cư: Catholic Refugees from the North of Vietnam, and Their Role in the Southern Republic, 1954-1959," *The Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, vol. 4, no. 3, (Fall 2009), 178-179.

aspects of the campaign during the immediate post-Geneva Accords period of the 300 days. As such, I believe that the period marks a distinct phase of the campaign.

As the basic shape of the ceasefire agreements that were to emerge from the negotiations at Geneva came into focus, the DRV leaders were presented with a decision to make about the land reform. Since the campaign was still in its early stages,[304] since their regime's assumption of control over the entirety of northern Vietnam would bring with it a whole new set of challenges, and especially since the Geneva Accords would contain articles unequivocally forbidding activities that were a crucial part of the land reform, should the campaign be delayed for a period until the postwar situation had stabilized?

If pressure from the Soviet Union and the PRC in late 1952 had been responsible for pushing Nguyễn Tất Thành to go forward with the campaign earlier than he and the VWP leaders had planned, surely he and his party had earned some breathing room now. With their victory at Điện Biên Phủ, the DRV had become a remarkable success story of the Communist bloc and a source of inspiration to people around the world. For its part, Moscow was not especially concerned with DRV domestic policy and preferred to let the PRC continue in its role as the primary adviser to the Vietnamese.[305] As for Beijing, it seems unlikely that it would have protested or withdrawn crucial aid had Thành informed them that his party would 'take its foot off the revolutionary accelerator' for a period, pausing or drastically down-scaling the land reform to avoid being flagged for violations of the Geneva Accords. After all, the Chinese had been instrumental in determining the overall shape of the Geneva Accords that were now (theoretically) supposed to circumscribe the DRV's activities.

The VWP leaders decided to press forward with the land reform, albeit with some modifications, despite the dangers and challenges posed by the new situation, and somehow were able to emerge as earnest adherents of the Geneva Accords in the eyes of many observers. How were they able to do this?

The DRV's "Implementation" Policy[306]

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.' 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 how to carry out the general free elections in July 1956.

Whether the Party leaders ever actually believed that there would be elections has been a subject of controversy in the field of Vietnamese studies. For the study of the land reform, the issue is important because the VWP leaders set June 1956 (that is, one month before the proposed general elections) as a strict deadline for the campaign, sometimes using the elections to justify that deadline to rank-and-file Party members. The Party leaders said that the land reform would need to be completed by June 1956 to free-up cadres for work carrying out the election a month later. In the aftermath of the land reform, circumstances required that the Party

[304] The land reform phase of the mass mobilization was only in its second wave, meaning that only 269 of the roughly 3000 communes in the DRV had undergone the campaign.
[305] Ilya Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam*, 65.
[306] I have borrowed Ralph Smith's term for the DRV approach to the Geneva Accords. See Ralph Smith, *An International History of the Vietnam War, Volume I: Revolution Versus Containment, 1955-1961* (London: The MacMillan Press Ltd, 1983), 20.

leaders provide a public explanation for the violence that had accompanied the campaign. In those explanations, they would stress "leftist deviations" committed by land reform cadres working at the local level as having damaged what was a good (and innocent) policy. Strict adherence to the June 1956 deadline, as we will see, would require a massive expansion of the campaign's scope along with efforts to speed up implementation as well. Since these were factors that impacted the way the campaign was carried out, it is worth considering whether the July 1956 elections were the reason for the speed of the campaign or an excuse put forward by the Party leaders as cover for some other reason.

In my view, a slight majority of scholars have tended to agree with the assessment of George Kahin that the DRV leaders "had ample basis" for believing that the July 1956 elections would take place, the reason being, according to Kahin, that elections were "clearly promised" in both the ceasefire agreement between the DRV and France as well as in the Final Declaration of the accords.[307] More recently, Mari Olsen has 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.[308]

The opposite (and, in my view, more convincing) argument—that the DRV leaders probably did not expect the elections to take place—is made by scholars such as Victor Bator,[309] Jeffrey Race,[310] and Ralph Smith. The latter, in his *International History of the Vietnam War* explains as follows:

> In 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. It was not fundamentally different from those of Germany and Korea, which had likewise been military in origin and had been accompanied by pious statements about the eventual political reunification.[311]

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[307] George McT. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in the Vietnam* (New York: Anchor Books Doubleday, 1986), 62. See also Mark Bradley, *Vietnam at War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 68. Bradley writes that the DRV leaders "were confident, when the promised reunification elections came in 1956, that the DRV would win."

[308] Mari Olsen, *Soviet-Vietnam Relations and the Role of China, 1949-1954* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 66-67. For example, Olsen quotes a statement from Nguyễn Tất Thành to the Soviet Ambassador to the DRV during a conversation held in June 1956: "at this point one can no longer count on the holding of consultations with South Vietnam and general elections for Vietnam. Diem refuses to follow the Geneva Agreement. In South Vietnam a referendum was held, also separate elections. The armed resistance of the sects has been smashed, Diem has to some extent strengthened his armed forces. The French have left South Vietnam. As a result, a new situation has arisen that one must take into account in the fight for the unification of the country." My sense is that Olsen, like other scholars, interprets statements such as these as proof that Nguyễn Tất Thành and the VWP leaders had, for a time, actually believed in the possibility of peaceful reunification through elections.

[309] Victor Bator, *Vietnam: A Diplomatic Tragedy: The Origins of the United States Involvement* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1965), 129-130.

[310] Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 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."

[311] Ralph Smith, *An International History of the Vietnam War*, 20.

He later writes:

> For the terms of the declaration to be fulfilled adequately in the North, moreover, it would have been necessary to restore full civil rights to the landlords and rich peasants—not to mention purged Communist cadres—who were being systematically impoverished and imprisoned (in some cases killed) during the later phases of the 'land reform' from early 1955 to mid-1956. There was no suggestion from Hanoi that such a move was seriously contemplated, and North Vietnamese diplomacy was probably based on the safe assumption that Diem would never agree to consultations and that their bluff would never be called.[312]

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."[313] During the negotiations, Bảo Đại (the leader of the State of Vietnam), with support from the United States, had made it clear that he rejected any elections not supervised by the United Nations. Moreover, past experience and even the tough negotiating stance of the French at Geneva suggested, as the VWP leaders were ideologically inclined to believe, that imperialist countries and their Vietnamese allies would not yield an inch of ground to the DRV that had not been thoroughly earned on the battlefield. The DRV leaders themselves would never risk their political power on an uncertain election, and there was no reason for them to think that their opponents in the South would act differently. The Soviets basically rejected free elections for Germany, and the same could be said of the PRC with respect to elections for Korea. As such, why should France and the United States not act similarly in Vietnam, where the numbers this time were not in their favor?

The 6th Plenum of the VWP Central Committee: July 15-17, 1954

Nguyễn Tất Thành and the VWP leaders introduced their new policies and slogans at the 6th Plenum of the Central Committee, held from July 15-17, 1954 (during the last week of the Geneva negotiations). In typical fashion, Thành opened the July plenum with a relatively brief report (about 10 pages) that presented the basic outlines of the Party's new policies. His report was then followed by a longer one delivered by Trường Chinh, who reinforced and elaborated upon the big ideas introduced by the Party leader.

Thành's report began with an assessment of the "world situation." In the eight paragraphs of this section, the proper noun "France" appeared nine times, while the proper noun "America" appeared thirty-one times. This was a reflection of the report's main assessment: the United States was starting to replace France as the dominant Western power in Indochina and the key foe of the DRV. To prepare Party members for a surprising about-face in DRV policy (alliance with the French), 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

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[312] Ibid, 30.

[313] Ilya Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam: Soviet Policy toward the Indochina Conflict, 1954-1963* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 70.

Pakistan, New Zealand, and Australia.[314] As for the United States and France, he pointed out French reluctance to join NATO and American efforts to "shove" France aside in Indochina. [315]

The DRV leader clarified through example the basic language that was to be used to describe America's involvement in Indochina. The important thing was to avoid using the term "anticommunist" or any such conceptual framework that suggested the United States had become involved in Indochina for ideological rather than materialistic reasons. 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 non-communism. Thus 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 the "world movement for peace and democracy." Instead of saying that the United States was establishing the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO)[316] to "contain" the spread of communism, Nguyễn Tất Thành wanted his propaganda organs to say 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 simply an effort to "sabotage peace."[317]

Finding a New Justification for the Maintenance of an Indochina Bloc

One of the key contentious issues of the Geneva Conference had been the independence and neutralization of Laos and Cambodia. As we saw, the DRV leaders had been disappointed that representatives of the Khmer Issarak and Pathet Lao had not been invited to the conference. The DRV delegation at the conference had pushed back hard against French, British, and American insistence that the situations in Laos and Cambodia were fundamentally different from Vietnam's.[318] Since the 1920s, many Vietnamese Communists had used the experience of French colonialism and the common goal of national liberation shared by Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos as a unifying theme that justified the preservation of close political ties between the three countries. With the likely departure of the French from Indochina, what now would be put forward to justify the preservation of an Indochina bloc? As Nguyễn Tất Thành explained to members of the Central Committee:

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[314] 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's.

[315] Hồ Chí Minh (Nguyễn Tất Thành), "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.

[316] 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, Thialand, Great Britain, and the U.S. The treaty stated the following: "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.

[317] Hồ Chí Minh, "6th Plenum Report," *VKDTT 1954*, 163.

[318] Devillers and Lacouture, *End of a War*, 153-154.

> Our victory has caused America to wake up. After the Battle of Điện Biên Phủ, America's interventionist scheme and plan also changed in order to extend the Indochina War, to internationalize the Indochina War, to sabotage the Geneva Conference. America is looking for any way to shove aside the French and occupy Vietnam-Laos-Cambodia, to turn the people of Vietnam-Cambodia-Laos into the slaves of America, and to create more tension in the world.
>
> And so: America is not only the enemy of the people of the world; *America is becoming the main and direct enemy of the Vietnamese-Cambodian-Laotian people*.[319]

Phrasing Indochinese politics in this way, Thành could now position the DRV as the protectors of Laos and Cambodia from America. Indeed, in the DRV's rhetoric, resistance against American imperialism would now replace resistance against French colonialism as the key unifying theme of a (VWP-dominated) "Vietnam-Cambodia-Laos" bloc. Over the next two decades, the United States, of course, would used a similar discourse of defense to justify its own involvement in South Vietnam, Laos, and, to a lesser extent, Cambodia, claiming to be protecting them from "Communist aggression."

New Tasks in the Post-Geneva Period

After summarizing the international and domestic situations, Nguyễn Tất Thành moved to the second half of his report, titled "New tasks." Still in the mode of preparing his listeners and readers for the startling policy changes that he was about to introduce (attempted alliance with the French and the embrace of peaceful means of reunification), Thành began with a reminder that the "correctness" of the Party's policies in the past was what had enabled their side to achieve the "good results" that they had today. The big idea of the VWP's policy at the present moment emerges from the following passage.

> For the past eight or nine years, the Party's platform has been clear: complete independence for Vietnam-Cambodia-Laos, out from under the French [thoát lý Pháp], no recognition for the French Union, kick the French army right out of Indochina, liquidate the puppet regime and the puppet army, confiscate the property of the imperialists and the Vietnamese traitors, create a movement for rent and debt reduction in order to move toward land reform, implement democracy throughout the country, carry out the resistance war until the final victory. That platform won us many victories. That platform was correct.
>
> But before this new situation today, we cannot maintain the old platform. Before, our slogan was: *"Fight till the end."* Now, because of the *new situation*, we need to put forward a *new slogan*: "peace, unity, independence, democracy." 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. Now, because we have spoken with each other, we have demanded that France pull out its troops and they have agreed to do so in steps [định kỳ]. Before, we wanted no part of the French Union; now, we have agreed to discuss the issue of participating in the French Union on an equal and voluntary basis. Before, our policy

[319] Hồ Chí Minh, "6th Plenum Report," *VKDTT 1954*, 165-166.

> 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.[320]

As a means of inspiring the French to resist the incursions of the Americans in Indochina, and perhaps also as a means of winning over French public opinion to some degree, the DRV would request to be a member of the French Union, posing as appreciators of French culture and defenders of some of France's commercial interests in North Vietnam. This approach by Phạm Văn Đồng seems to have been taken at face value by the French leader, Pierre Mendes-France, during their discussions at Geneva. As Jean Sainteny recounted, twenty-six years later:

> On August 15 [1954] Pierre Mendes-France, whom I barely knew but with whom I had had a long conversation on Asian problems, invited me to his home in Marly. We had a long talk about the aspects of the problem and the possible developments of the mission he wanted to entrust to me. He agreed absolutely with my desire to act as "a continuer and not a liquidator" during my mission in Hanoi. He said he had been impressed at Geneva by the remarks of the Vietnamese delegation. Several times they had declared their desire to conserve in Vietnam a French presence, for they still recognized such a need.[321]

Toward the end of his report, Nguyễn Tất 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 of our work needs to be aimed against the American imperialists." To this end, the Party leader 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.

Thành spoke broadly at the 6th Central Committee plenum of the many complications of the coming period and of the need for patience. In typical Communist parlance, he warned of "leftist" and "rightist deviations" among cadres, with the former generally amounting to lack of patience, lack of respect for the importance of struggle on the diplomatic front, and eagerness to solve problems militarily. "Rightist deviation," on the other hand, generally meant lack of faith, pessimism, unprincipled compromise with the enemy, a loss of revolutionary vigor, and a desire for the easy life.[322]

Then Thành moved to the issue of the "three new tasks" brought about by the "new situation."

> 1. Take advantage of and consolidate the peace. Carry out unification, independence, and democracy throughout the country.
> 2. Strengthen the forces of our people's army, build a people's army that is strong and suited to the demands of the new situation.
> 3. Continue giving land to the tiller; make efforts to restore production, prepare the conditions for national construction.[323]

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[320] Nguyễn Tất Thành, "6th Plenum Report," *VKDTT*, vol. 15, 1954, 168.
[321] Jean Sainteny, *Ho Chi Minh and his Vietnam: A Personal Memoir* (translated from French by Herma Briffault) (Chicago: Cowles Book Company, Inc. 1972), 107-108.
[322] Nguyễn Tất Thành, "6th Plenun Report," *VKDTT 1954*, 170-171.
[323] Ibid, 171.

Thus the land reform was to continue in the new situation. Members of the Central Committee in attendance at the meeting might have wondered whether Thành's sudden gesture of warmth and reconciliation with the French would also affect their treatment of alleged "traitors," "landlords," "spies," "saboteurs," etc. targeted in the VWP's land reform. Would Thành's public stress on a "gentler policy" for national reunification translate to a "gentler" approach to the VWP's alleged internal enemies in North Vietnam? This was not to be the case. Nguyễn Tất Thành, Phạm Văn Đồng, and other top VWP 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.[324]

The Secret Politburo Meeting of September 5-7, 1954

At some point in early August, as it appears from the Party's internal documents, the leaders of the DRV began to realize how disastrous the "free movement" clause of the Geneva Accords could be to their image and to their '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 more waiting for passage.[325] 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 (feigned) public insistence that the partition of the country was only temporary. On September 1, 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.[326] 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 Nguyễn Tất Thành and the other Party leaders and perhaps was part of the motivation for the calling of a secret, three-day Politburo meeting four days later from September 5-7. It is likely that the letter from the ICC warned the DRV leaders of evidence suggesting they were violating the Geneva Accords in some way related to the "free movement" clause.

Curbing the Emigration

[324] 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 their chapter, "The Sainteny Mission," in *End of a War: Indochina 1954.*

[325] John Prados, "The Numbers Game: How Many Vietnamese Fled South in 1954?" *The VVA Veteran*, January/February 2005.

[326] "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* [The People], no. 223, September 9, 1954.

The three-day meeting of the Politburo from September 5-7 appears to have covered a number of large strategic issues related to how the increasingly complicated situation in Vietnam would be handled. First and foremost was the emigration issue. In a directive from the Party Secretariat, released on September 5, Trường Chinh spoke with great concern about the intention of Ngô Đình Diệm, the French, and the Americans to encourage the emigration to the South of "500,000 to 1 million" Northerners, mostly "puppet soldiers and their families, Catholics, youths, civil servants, teachers, intellectuals, professionals, etc." As the directive 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." By the end of August, stated the directive, about 60,000 people had emigrated to the South—apparently a significant underestimation of the actual number, which, according to Prados, was closer to 100,000. Though the Party leaders felt that their 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."[327]

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 be in violation of the Geneva Accords, the Party leaders created a semantic template for discussing the emigration that would turn efforts to prevent people from leaving into efforts to uphold the accords. The first requirement was to deny all agency on the part of the émigrés. No peasant would leave the DRV on his own volition; they 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 not as violations of the Geneva Accords but 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 touched only a tiny fraction of the people who left.[328]

An interesting question is why, considering the regime's professed obsession with "landlords", "internal enemies", "saboteurs", "traitors", "reactionaries", "spies", etc., did the Party leaders not simply welcome the emigration 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, Trường Chinh explained the situation as follows:

> 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 will be full of misery and hardship. If the enemy succeeds in their scheme, it will be disadvantageous for us politically. The reason is not only that they would be able to fool both world and domestic opinion by claiming that Vietnamese went to the South because our regime

[327] "Chỉ thị của Ban Bí thư: Về việc đấu tranh chống Pháp và bọn Ngô Đình Diệm dụ dỗ 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], *VKDTT* (Hà Nội: Chính trị Quốc gia, 2001, vol. 15, 1954), 263.

[328] 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 their village priest.

> is not good, creating a disadvantages for us in the subsequent free elections. [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 the task of building the country.[329]

Trường Chinh chided rank-and-file Party members for not recognizing the importance of this "grave and Machiavellian ruse" of the enemy. He complained that the DRV propaganda aimed at curbing the emigration (i.e. promises to those segments of society who had not been on the DRV side of the conflict) had not "gone deep enough." It may have been that the Party's determination to preserve flexibility with respect to its alliances, promises, and professed goals, worked against the likelihood of being able to change many people's minds. When the Party took power in 1945, it did so under the guise of its front organization, the Viet Minh. It had appealed to rural elites to join the struggle against the French and had vehemently denied being communist, even claiming to have disbanded the Communist Party. For the past year, the VWP had been carrying out a policy whose goal was the destruction of the rural landlord class. If there was one clear theme of the land reform it was that of revenge. These dynamics made it highly unlikely that the Party's promises of clemency would have much effect on people's decisions about whether to leave or not.

Even within Trường Chinh's directive, when discussing how "puppet soldiers" should be handled to prevent their emigration, the Party general-secretary still put in a time-qualifier to signal that today's leniency was likely to be only a temporary tactical measure.

> Suspend the forcing of puppet soldiers to carry out "confessions," do not investigate them for documents and crimes. Call out for puppet soldiers to turn in their weapons, but do not force them to do so [truy bức]. 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 to the masses so that they clearly understand our policy with respect to puppet soldiers at this time; we only punish those who are zealously carrying out sabotage. When accepting those puppet soldiers who, here and there, desert, we can educate them appropriately [thích đáng], we should not "open up a re-education class."[330]

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. Trường Chinh stated that in areas containing large concentrations of Catholics such as Bùi Chú and Phát Diệm, 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 (holding strictly to its new semantic template for descriptions of people leaving for the South) stated that efforts should be made to "mobilize those people who had been forced [to emigrate] but then subsequently escaped back, using their experience to expose the enemy's trick [lừa đảo] for Catholics to see."[331] 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, Khu stated that they were to be promised the same salary that they had received under the

[329] Ibid, 265.
[330] Ibid, 267.
[331] Ibid, 268.

Bảo Đại regime.[332] When the 300-day period of free movement had passed on May 18, 1955, these temporary concessions could then be abandoned gradually.

Refinements to the VWP's Strategy for the South

As noted above, the Politburo carried out a secret meeting from September 5 to 7. On the second day of their meeting, Trường Chinh released a second directive, this one on behalf of the Politburo. It provided further clarification of what the Party's overall strategy would be for gaining eventual political control over the South or "unifying the country," as they were always careful to phrase it. One aspect of formulating policy for the South was that it served as a referendum of sorts on the succession of policies that the Party had adopted since taking power in 1945, primarily in the North. Since late 1952, when the decision to carry out the land reform had been made, the Party had steadily ratcheted up its demonization of the "landlord class" as responsible for almost every problem in rural life. The Geneva Accords, in some respects, recreated on a larger scale the dynamic that had characterized the First Indochina War after the installation of the Bảo Đại regime in the summer of 1949. A relatively weak anti-communist Vietnamese regime backed by a strong Western power had tentative control over strategically important parts of the country.

It is clear from the strategy that the Party leaders chose in their approach to the South that they were intent on repeating the basic tactics that had brought them success in the recent war against the French and the State of Vietnam. While their land reform teams were methodically purging local political organizations in the northern countryside of members of the elite class and replacing them with poor peasants, 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 [tranh thủ] a large segment of the popular masses, we gain influence over and win the sympathy of a broad segment of society. We can make the French and their puppets unable to not respect the Ceasefire Agreement, unable to not recognize people's democratic freedoms, and unable to not 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 make members of the higher classes and many people working for the puppet regime see that after the country is unified, they will just have a means of escape but will actually be able to maintain their given position in society.[333]

To actually follow through with this promise to elites in the Ngô Đình Diệm government would have meant a renunciation of 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 the Party leaders, that prescriptions designed for winning over the South would take some of the revolutionary sting out of the land reform.

[332] Ibid, 269.
[333] Ibid, 275.

What would land reform cadres think, for example, when they learned that the United Vietnam Front was to be changed to the "United People's Front" or, "for short", as Trường Chinh explained, the "United Front." What would the class character of that new front be?

> 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 working class, the peasant class, the petit-bourgeoisie, the national bourgeoisie, and patriotic notables. The Front can even attract those elements of the compradore 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.[334]

Thus the new front targeted at the South was to be geared toward attracting members of the (much pilloried) landlord class just as the old Viet Minh front and its replacement, the United Vietnam front, had been. It must have seemed strange indeed for land reform cadres to see that, while they were organizing the public trials and executions of local landlords, the slogan to be applied in the South for "puppet soldiers" was "Vietnamese people should not shoot Vietnamese people."[335]

In addition to the two directives, the secret meeting of the Politburo from September 5-7 also resulted in a broader Resolution that summarized the major aspects of the current situation and the adjustments that needed to be made to the Party's policies. First of all, the resolution stressed that "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 somewhat 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 moderate [ôn hòa], 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 as such is [our government] appropriate for the current situation in our country, and only as such 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.[336]

Adjustments to the Land Reform Campaign

1. Keeping the Campaign away from Areas where Emigration was a Danger

[334] Ibid, 276.
[335] Ibid, 277. Ironically, this was the same principle advanced by the some of the hapless Nationalist Party members in 1946 when they found themselves under attack from the ICP.
[336] "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], *VKDTT 1954*, 289. Tuong Vu

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 would need to be made to the land reform campaign. From a geographic perspective, the areas of most concern were those close to the port city of Hải Phòng, which 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),[337] the Politburo Resolution stated that, "for at least one year (that is, before we take control over Hải Phòng), we should not carry out land reform, but in recently liberated places in the countryside that are far from Hải Phòng, 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 Reorganization should not be mentioned "too soon". Thus we can see how the threat of the emigration directly impacted the structure of the campaign—keep the land reform away from places where people had a relatively easy escape route to Hải Phòng and the South.[338]

2. Toning down the Land Reform Propaganda

In addition to these geographical implications, the post-Geneva situation also had implications for the way the campaign was to be propagandized. The Party leaders understandably instructed the editors of their main newspapers that direct references to the killing of landlords should now be avoided and that, generally speaking, the profile of the campaign should be lowered somewhat. This meant fewer and less sensational articles about the land reform for a period of time so as not to provide the enemy with potential 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 communes 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 communes of wave 5 [currently undergoing the campaign], mass mobilization through rent reduction will have been carried out in 826 communes. This means that we have mobilized 64% of the communes in the old free zone in accordance with our original plan.

[337] T/L Ban Bí thu, 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 Temporarily Occupied Areas that were Recently Liberated], *VKDTT 1954*, 325.

[338] 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?

> The population of these mobilized communes is 3,479,545 people (the population in the communes 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.[339]

Two days after the September 5-7 Polituro 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. That article read as follows:

> **Wave 1 of the Land Reform in the Vietnamese North Interzone Has Concluded**
>
> The land reform work teams in 47 communes of the three districts: Phú-Bình, Đồng-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, Đồng-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, 1 and a half [buffalo] was distributed to three middle-peasant families. 45 landless peasants and 94 poor peasants received 146 plows.[340]

The article makes no mention of "struggles" against landlords, and, indeed, the word "landlord" does not even appear. We simply hear of land, buffalos, and farm tools being distributed. As far as how the land reform team in the commune came into possession of these things, it is left entirely up to the reader to imagine.

Fear of being flagged for Geneva Accords violations by the ICC 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

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[339] "Thành tích bốn đợt phát động quần chúng giảm tô" [Results for Four Waves of Mass Mobilization through Rent Reduction], *Nhân dân* [The People], no. 214, August 13-15, 1954.

[340] "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* [The People], no. 223, September 9-10, 1954.

of "confiscating" the land of the "French colonialists" and either "confiscating" [tịch thu] or "requisitioning" [trưng thu] 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 [đối phương]." The words "confiscate" and "requisition" would be changed to "forced purchase" [trưng mua].

3. Preventing the Loss of Struggle Targets

The Geneva Accords compelled other cosmetic changes in the land reform as well 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.[341]

And finally, the Politburo decided that the situation with the Geneva Accords and the threat of emigration compelled them to "reconsider" the land reform from a chronological perspective, in particular the amount of time to be devoted to carrying out the mass mobilization in the areas controlled by the DRV during the war. What was the reason for this reconsideration?

> If class relations are too tense and the time of that tenseness carries on too long, then it will not be advantageous for the effort to consolidate the peace, restore production, and restore construction of the economy. As such, 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 come up with a concrete plan that allows us to complete the mass mobilization in our region (excluding ethnic minority areas) within about two years.[342]

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 Đặng Xuân Khu actually meant by class relations being "too tense," but it appears to be 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 Trường Chinh having felt compelled to depict an arbitrary decision by the Party leaders as having derived somehow 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,

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[341] "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], *VKDTT 1954*, 298.
[342] Ibid.

the departure of large numbers of landlords would be expected to ease whatever "class tensions" 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, needed to be implemented. However, the resolution instructed, it was important to make the cadres and peasants understand that, despite these changes, "our land policy has basically not changed; the aspects [of the policy] that have changed are all secondary and contingent."[343]

4. Transmitting the Politburo's Ideas to the Central Land Reform Committee: September 7-8, 1954.

After these issues, particularly the changes to the land reform, were worked out by the Politburo in their secret meeting of September 5-7, they appear to have been presented immediately to the "Central Land Reform Committee." An article in the September 13 issue of *The People* describes a meeting of that Committee on September 7 and 9. There is no mention of the Politburo meeting that immediately preceded it. In keeping with the function of that administrative body to appear as the generator of the land reform's policies, the article depicted the changes that were actually made by the Politburo as having been made by the Central Land Reform Committee:

> On the 7th and 8th of September, the Central Land Reform Committee met to listen to a report from its Standing Committee on the situation with the mass mobilization through rent reduction and land reform. At the same time, the Committee discussed an important issue: After the establishment of peace in our country, is there a need to change the specific policies of the mass mobilization? How should the mass mobilization be carried out so that it is appropriate to the new conditions?[344]

The article then describes reports delivered to the Committee by the Party heavyweights, Hồ Viết Thắng, Hoàng Quốc Việt, and Trường Chinh, noting certain "requests for changes in a few specific aspects of the policy concerning the way of implementing rent reduction and land reform." As the Party's main newspaper had with its description of how the National Assembly and the United Vietnam front had received the Land Reform, *The People* talked of "discussions" taking place and "changes" being made to a "few places" in the plan as though the opinions of those members of the Land Reform Committee who were there to give it a broad, non-Communist appearance actually mattered. As normal, the article provided a quote showing enthusiastic approval of the "requested" adjustments by a well-known member of the ranks of those who sat on the committee for appearances only. "Mr. Phan Kế Toại, the Minister of the Interior, said, 'This proposed plan is a victorious one because it is very clear-sighted [sáng suốt], clever [khôn khéo], and flexible; it is truly appropriate for our struggle during the current

[343] Ibid, 298-299.
[344] "Ủy ban Cải cách ruộng đất Trung ương họp lần thứ hai" [The Central Land Reform Committee Holds Its Second Meeting], *Nhân dân*, no. 225, September 13-14, 1954.

historical step." To further strengthen the democratic image of the government (in the bourgeois democratic sense), the article from *The People* concluded by reporting that the Decree drafted at the Meeting of the Central Land Reform Committee would be presented to the Government for "inspection and ratification."[345]

Further Tinkering with the Land Reform Program

The tinkering with the land reform by the Party leaders to avoid being flagged for Geneva Accords violations would continue. Providing clarification on some of the adjustments to the campaign, Trường Chinh announced in a November 3 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 inter-district-level "special people's courts" would simply set up and "guide" [điều khiển] the trials of "cruel and despotic landlords." These trials would be combined with peasant "denunciations" [tố khổ] of the accused landlords, so the spirit of the old "denunciation sessions" was preserved to some extent. In the Politburo directive, 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.
>
> As such, the Case Assessment Bureau [Ban xử trí] at all levels needs to approve the cases in time [cho kịp thời]. Any commune whose cases have been approved by the upper-level needs to *immediately set up a court and try the case.* Any commune 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 set up immediately public trials [công thẩm] 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 commune or for a group of communes where the verdicts can be announced.[346]

Evidently the "verdict" of the case was decided not be the people on hand carrying out the trial but by "higher-ups." Moreover, the second trials, which were to be held after the intial "public trials," were apparently to take place after the verdicts had already been decided by "higher-ups." Thus it appears that these second trials, at which the official verdicts would be read, were simply staged public spectacles that had nothing to do with the actual establishment of innocence or guilt.

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[345] Ibid.

[346] Trường Chinh [Đặng Xuân Khu], "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 1954*, 356.

There were other proposed measures to speed up the land reform's judicial process as well:

> 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. As such, a court session needs to held in every commune. If there are not enough juridical cadres [cán bộ tư pháp] to go around 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 [Đoàn ủy] 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 provide coaching for and share experiences with the leaders and vice-leaders of land reform teams.[347]

Concluding the directive, Trường Chinh stated that it was only to be sent to Land Reform Brigade leaders and Provincial Party leaders, who would then relay its content "by word of mouth" to the leaders and vice-leaders of land reform teams.

Possible Implications of the Politburo's Policy Changes and Adjustments

It is worth pointing out a few potential consequences of the Party's policy changes and adjustments in the autumn of 1954. First, it was possible that slogans devised for use against the Ngô Đình Diệm regime in the South, such as "Vietnamese must not shoot other Vietnamese," "guarantee the right to democratic freedoms," and "struggle for peace" would strike a chord with the VWP's own cadres, particularly with the end the war. These ideas did not sit easily with the notion of class warfare that underlay the land reform.

Second, as mentioned earlier, the speeding-up of the land reform so as to finish the campaign in two years would mean, among other things, less time to train cadres. Cramming more areas into a shorter amount of time would also mean that a larger percentage of the total number of cadres carrying out the campaign at any given time would be doing so for the first time. By going slowly, the VWP leaders would have had the option of using a stable group of 'professional' land reform cadres who could have provided some consistency in the way that the campaign was implemented. But this would have run against the fundamental conception of the land reform as a valuable revolutionary learning experience for the regime's bureaucrats. Nevertheless, the fact that the Party leaders were not willing to consider taking more time or adopting a more professional approach to implementation suggests that what they wanted the campaign to accomplish was not, in their minds, connected strongly with the publicly promoted principle of "going deep" [đi sâu] into the masses to learn the actual situation on the ground. Indeed—and this is pure speculation on my part—it is possible that the Party leaders actually felt that the more time cadres spent in a local community, the less likely they were to bring about the desired results. The same might also be true of the Party leadership's feelings about the land reform's judicial system. They may have felt that slowing down the judicial process, taking more

[347] Ibid, 356.

time to consider the available evidence, would actually work against the desired results of the campaign.

Third, the fact that the Geneva Accords were supposed to allow people to emigrate to either North or South might raise questions about the justification for the land reform's violence in the minds of cadres. Basically, the Geneva Accords presented a peaceful alternative to the method of overthrowing the landlord class promoted by the mass mobilization. Would it not be easier to simply tell rural elites to leave or risk being targeted for struggle in the future? If landlords were responsible for so much evil in the northern Vietnamese countryside (as the campaign's propaganda stressed), would it not benefit the cause of the DRV to have these 'troublemakers' implanted in the South? Why not encourage them to go?

And finally, as we saw, the Party leaders decided during the September Politburo meeting that, for the 300-day period of "free movement," the land reform should be kept away from populated areas where access to Hải Phòng and its emigration ships was easiest. Generally speaking, these were the areas of the Red River delta that had been under French control up until the end of the war. This long delay would give local elites with easy access to Hải Phòng plenty of time to hear sensational rumors about the land reform and leave for the South. If too many of their ranks left, though, there was the risk that some land reform cadres would conclude (logically) that the VWP's calculus on the percentage of the DRV rural population comprised by landlords (5.68 percent) must no longer be valid. What would a cadre do in a community for two to three months if there were no landlords to be struggled against?

The Regime Assumes Control over Hà Nội: October, 1954 (Calming the City's Residents, Handling the ICC, Fighting the Emigration)

One thing that would have been on the minds of the Party leaders as they met and discussed the situation in September was their impending assumption of control over Hà Nội on October 9. If their enemies were having success convincing Catholic peasants to leave for the South, it was easy to imagine similar success among the residents of Hà Nội. The Party leaders frequently stressed that they wanted their assumption of power over French-controlled areas (especially Hà Nội and Hải Phòng) to be carried out in an orderly fashion, avoiding incidents that would reflect badly upon their regime, possibly raising questions both domestically and internationally about its fitness for rule. The key concerns of urban residents, depending on their backgrounds, would have ranged from fear of stigmatization as a collaborator, loss of property, and general uncertainty about what life would be like in the city under the DRV regime. Would, for example, the DRV state be able to guarantee the supply of rice and other goods to the city? This last issue was especially difficult because the DRV was experiencing a food crisis, with no good options at its disposal to address the problem. If the regime allowed severe food shortages to hit Hà Nội, it might inspire more people to leave for the South. Yet an aggressive taxation of DRV peasants, many of whom were already suffering from hunger, might play into the hands of the VWP's rivals in Saigon, inspiring yet more people to emigrate.

The takeover of Hà Nội would happen during the North's October rice harvest, always a nervous time for the regime as it both attempted to collect its agricultural tax and learned, as usual, that its policies for increasing production had achieved agonizingly disappointing results yet again. By November, with the harvest mostly completed, the rice situation had become

clearer. Phạm Văn Đồng, the vice-president of the DRV, as he had during 1953, issued a directive summing up the situation:

> In the province of Hưng Yên alone there are 2,989 families suffering from hunger. There are families who need to leave their ancestral homes to search for work in the provincial towns; there are families that eat one meal every two days. In Hà Tĩnh province, there are communes with as many as 20 families that are now begging for food and there are people who have starved to death. In interzone 3, there are as many as 60,000 people suffering from hunger, with the worst places being the provinces of Hà Nam and Hà Đông. The provinces ò Hải Ninh, Bắc Giang, Quảng Yên, and Vĩnh Phúc also have people suffering from hunger. Famine is spreading and it could become serious, carrying on until the May 1955 harvest, especially in those areas hit by flooding, areas that only harvest one rice crop, and those areas that were damaged by the enemy.[348]

It was normal for there to be food shortages in northern Vietnam in the months of April and September, just before the two rice harvests of May and October. The fact that Phạm Văn Đồng was describing the presence and spread of famine conditions in much of the DRV in November, when the supply of rice should have been at its greatest, gives a sense for how dire the situation must have been.

In his account of the period, Maneli states that the DRV leaders requested food aid from the Soviet Union and the PRC, indeed from the entire Commuist bloc. But the Soviets and Chinese apparently received these requests with "indifference." As Maneli wrote:

> In a group of close friends of the [Polish] delegation, we characterized Soviet and Chinese indifference to hunger not only as a betrayal of the principles of "proletarian internationalism," but as a political crime that would be fully exploited by the Western news media.
>
> In begging for food, the North Vietnamese invoked both political and humanitarian arguments and were always told by the Chinese and Soviet representatives that they would do everything in their power to help them. But they did nothing, except make promises. One of my Vietnamese friends, a high-ranking official in the Central Committee, told me about the unrealized Chinese and Soviet promises with tears in his eyes. He recalled that in 1944-46 there had been such a period of famine in the North that there were losses in every family; at least 10 percent of the population, I was told, died in the Red River Delta. Then, the Communists blamed colonialism and imperialism—especially the French government—which did not organize the transportation of rice from central and southern Vietnam to the North. "Now we have a socialist government," my friend often repeated, "and the situation is exactly the same, and morally even more difficult to bear."[349]

To ameliorate the hunger problem, Phạm Văn Đồng called upon cadres once again to promote the Party's "10 Policies for Increasing Production." The DRV vice-president acknowledged that these "10 Policies" had been promoted for "a long time" already, but the fact that they had never produced the expected rise in production seems not to have shaken his faith

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[348] Tô [Phạm Văn Đồng], "Chỉ thị của Ban Bí thư, 3/11/1954: Về chống đói, phòng đói và phục hồi sản xuất" [Directive of the Secretariat: 3/11/1954: Fighting Hunger, Preventing Hunger, and Restoring Production.], *VKDTT 1954*, 343.

[349] Maneli, *War of the Vanquished*, 39-40.

in their correctness. The lack of results, as usual, came not from the policies but from their poor implementation by local cadres: "many cadres have not yet studied [these policies] and grasped them firmly in order to implement them…" One of the measures to ensure that the DRV state would have enough rice to stay afloat and provide aid to starving communities was the resurrection of the policy of "forced borrowing" [trưng vay] from those in the countryside who seemed to have rice to spare (i.e. landlords). Phạm Văn Đồng stated that government needed to "step forward and guarantee the forced loan so as to reassure the lender," being sure to produce such things as a "receipt and clear record" of the transaction to "avoid corruption and waste." The directive spoke of paying back the lenders afterward, but the record of the DRV state on this issue was hardly reassuring. Phạm Văn Đồng concluded his directive on the food crisis with the warning that the "famine could be more serious than the one in 1953 if we do not pay attention to fighting it."[350]

Another aspect of stemming the emigration was calming the nerves of residents in Hà Nội, the majority of whom would have at least considered the option of heading to the South if they did not actually do so. There was concern among residents of the city about the land reform, about which they had no doubt heard plenty of rumors. It should be borne in mind that virtually every single resident of that city, no matter from what class, was a small part of a much larger family that was based in clusters around the northern Vietnamese countryside. In other words, the land reform had implications in some way for just about every resident in the city.

Hoàng Quốc Việt's Land Reform Speech in Hà Nội: December 25, 1954[351]

At some point in December, a couple of months after the Party leaders had returned to Hà Nội, they decided that the time had come to provide an official explanation of the land reform for nervous residents of the city. They nominated Hoàng Quốc Việt, the Chairman of the Bureau for People's Mobilization, to deliver a speech in the Opera House explaining the campaign to concerned members of the city. The speech appears to have been targeted at "industrialists" since it devoted considerable attention to explaining how the land reform would provide a boost to industrial production in northern Vietnam. The Party leaders published Việt's speech in the December 28, 29, and 30 issues of the Party's (now daily) newspaper, *The People*. For a period of a few months, the speech would serve as the model for how Party members were to speak about the campaign to residents of Hà Nội and of other areas that only came under DRV control after the Geneva Accords. The speech's content must be understood in light of the Party leadership's concern that the land reform might drive yet more residents of the city to emigrate to the South, fear that the campaign might cause them to be accused of violating the Geneva Accords, and determination to continue the campaign despite these risks.

The Rationale for Land Reform

Hoàng Quốc Việt's speech began with an explanation for why the government had adopted the policy of land reform and then moved to a discussion of a few aspects related to its implementation that were of particular concern to his audience. As was usually the case, Hoàng Việt's conceptualization of the Vietnamese countryside harkened back to the conceptualizations

[350] Phạm Văn Đồng, "3/11/1954 Secretariat Directive on Famine," *VKĐTT 1954*, 349-350.
[351] Hoàng Quốc Việt, "Vì sao nước ta phải cải cách ruộng đất?" [Why Must our Country Must Undergo Land Reform?], *Nhân dân* [The People], no. 302-304, December 28-30, 1954.

used by the Party during the 1920's, 1930's, and early 1940s (i.e. before their Party seized power in 1945). That conceptualization viewed rural life in Vietnam as primarily a battle between a class of feudal landlords (more or less allied with the French colonial state) and their victims, the poor peasant majority. As for the previous nine years of peasant life under the leadership of the Party-state in large sections of the Vietnamese countryside, Hoàng Quốc Việt had very little to say.

> After the August Revolution in 1945, our country escaped from the imperialist yoke. Peasants and other segments of our people enjoyed the right to political freedom. Under the democratic republican regime, the democratic economic policies of our Government such as rent reduction, debt reduction, and the campaigns to increase production brought a certain amount of benefit [mang lại một phần quyền lợi] to the peasants. But the landlord class still looked for any way to avoid implementing rent reduction, to resist the policies of the Government, to use any ruse to maintain their supremacy so that they could continue to exploit the peasants.
>
> As a result, the life of the peasants has not yet been improved. Moreover, while the peasants and other segments of society were contributing all their personal and material strength to the resistance war, many members of the landlord class served as the lackeys of the French and Americans in order to sabotage the resistance war. [These members of the landlord class] created countless catastrophies for the people in the free zones as well as in the temporarily occupied zones.[352]

Hoàng Quốc Việt mentioned rent and debt reduction as a part of the Party's land policy, but he made no mention of the Party's policy of "temporary land redistribution," which, as we have seen, was normally coupled with rent reduction as the two key pillars of the Party's land policy. It seems unlikely that this omission was accidental. An important policy speech such as the one delivered by Việt would have been checked by numerous editorial eyes, including other top Party leaders, before being printed in *The People*. Arguably the strongest evidence for the economic justification of the land reform would be the results of the significant amount of land distributed by the DRV regime over the previous nine years. The fact that Hoàng Quốc Việt left this policy of "temporary land redistribution" out of his description of the northern Vietnamese countryside suggests strongly that he and the top Party leaders were concerned that it might weaken the public justification for the campaign by showing that land redistributions had not contributed to the raising of production.

Hoàng Quốc Việt's arrangement of details in his narrative of the transition from colonial to "people's democratic" rule seems to have be done with an eye toward leading his listeners and readers to assume that the process of land concentration in the hands of the landlord class had continued during the nine years of war. The "people's democratic regime" had attempted to curb these landlord ruses but had been thwarted in its efforts by the landlord class. Thus the relationship between the DRV state and the peasantry appeared, in Việt's speech, to be a purely supportive one, with the latter producing policies meant to rescue the peasants from landlord exploitation and making none of its own demands on the peasants. The uninformed reader of the article would have no idea that the DRV state's policies had also included an agricultural tax, mandatory service in the army, mandatory service as "people's porters," as well as the distribution of French and "Vietnamese traitor" land. Everything difficult about peasant life was,

[352] Ibid.

as had been argued by Party members during the two decades before taking power, essentially the fault of the landlord class:

> Why are the peasants miserable, cold, hungry, and poor in this way? The main reason is that they have had nearly all of their land expropriated. The peasants turn large areas of extremely fertile untilled land into farm land, but half of their ranks have no land. The majority of the remaining half lack land because it has been blatantly appropriated from them, with most of it accumulating into the hands of the landlord class. According to the statistics of six communes used to test the land reform in Thái Nguyên [province], before the campaign, landlords occupied [on average] 2 mẫu 7 sào 1 thước, whereas the middle peasants only owned, on average, 4 sào 3 thước, poor peasants, 1 sào 8 thước, and farmhands only 9 thước.[353]

Again, the presentation of the information seems intended to lead the reader to assume that processes in effect during the colonial period (a concentration of land in the hands of rural elites) had continued more or less unabated during the nine years of war. To support this idea, Hoàng Quốc Việt refers to land tenure statistics taken from the six experimental communes of Thái Nguyên province where the mass mobilization and land reform phases were first tested by the Party leaders. Since these six communes (out of roughly 3,000 in the entire DRV) included the single largest plantation in all of northern Vietnam (Nguyễn Thị Năm's in Đồng Bẩm commune), any land tenure statistics derived from them were likely to create an image of land concentration vastly greater than in other parts of the North.

Allaying Hanoians' Fears about the Land Reform

Since one of the key purposes of Hoàng Quốc Việt's speech was to assuage concerns about the campaign in the minds of Hà Nội residents contemplating whether to emigrate to the South, a large portion of the speech was dedicated to downplaying the likelihood (in the minds of these urbanites) that they themselves or their family members in the countryside would be targeted by the campaign. Việt did this in a few ways.

First of all, as the Party leaders had done in their explanation of the land reform before the National Assembly, he placed great emphasis on the idea that the government's approach differentiated, with a dull and painstaking precision, the various elements of the landlord class. As we saw, internally, the Party leaders explained this differentiation as a means of "dispersing" [phân hóa] the landlord class to better facilitate its destruction. Publicly, however, they discussed the policy of differentiation as serving the purpose of "treating appropriately" [phân biệt đối đã thích đáng] the various different elements of the landlord class. Contrary to the internal language, the external language, in Hoàng Quốc Việt's speech as in other places, focused on giving the impression that the inspiration for the policy of "landlord differentiation" was a benevolent desire on the part of the DRV leaders to assure the safety and fair treatment of the vast majority of landlords. Việt stressed to his audience that those landlords targeted for struggle were only the "extraordinarily cruel" [đại ác] and "extraordinarily despotic" ones. Even among the landlord category "cruel and despotic," these were allegedly to be divided into three categories, with only the first category actually undergoing trial.

[353] Ibid.

> As for the second and third class cruel [and despotic] landlords, though they also have committed crimes, the peasants do not make them targets of public struggle sessions or send them before the Special People's Courts. Rather, the peasants send them to attend a class for studying policies in order for these landlords to clearly recognize their mistakes, show repentance, apologize to the peasants, and voluntarily carry out correctly the Government's land policies.
>
> As for normal landlords, the peasants do not use the form of struggle to be used for the two types of landlord above. [Rather,] the normal landlord needs to stand before the peasants, accept his class status, and carry out correctly the Party's land policy. [354]

Thus, with all these different categories of landlord, it appeared that the chances of being made a target of struggle were extremely slim.

Another way in which the speech attempted to reassure listeners and readers was through its descriptions of the type of cruel and despotic landlords punished in the campaign. The crimes alleged to have been perpetrated by these people were of such a diabolical and extraordinary nature that the campaign seemed only to target the most hideous and cruel criminals—people who would have been severely punished in any civilized country.

> According to the statistics of 12 communes in Nghệ An province that underwent mass mobilization for rent reduction back in August of 1953, 54 cruel and despotic landlords killed 249 people, beat and seriously wounded 416 people, held captive [bắt giam] 1,992 people. One of their ranks raped hundreds of women. Another forced peasants to lick up his phlegm. In the distrct of Thanh-ba (Phú-thọ province), there was one named Nguyễn Văn Trường who sewed the mouths shut of children working for him so that they would not secretly eat his food. In Thái Nguyên province, there was a [cruel despotic landlord] named Nguyễn Thị Năm who, with her bloodsoaked hands, beat to death or severely injured 300 people. Even under the people's democratic government, many landlords continue to abuse and kill peasants.[355]

Questionable Aspects of Hoàng Quốc Việt's Land Reform Speech

Nevertheless, aspects of Hoàng Quốc Việt's explanation, when considered carefully, might have raised a few eyebrows among readers of the Party newspaper. For example, what was the actual function of the Special People's Courts? If being a member of the landlord class connected one with criminal activitiy, who or what body determined where a person fell on the landlord scale? If, as Việt explained, only the worst of the three categories of "cruel and despotic landlord" went before the Special People's Court, this meant that the landlord's ranking had already been determined before he was sent before the court. It appeared that the court had little or no input in the assessment of a landlord's alleged crime, i.e. whether he qualified as first, second, or third degree "cruel and despotic landlord." Apparently, the second and third degree landlords underwent no trial at all. Who determined, then, what crimes they had to "apologize for" and "show repentance for" during and after their "education classes"? It appears that the issue of guilt or innocence was determined without the involvement of the court at all. What then, was the purpose of the court?

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[354] Ibid.
[355] Ibid.

Another aspect of Hoàng Quốc Việt's speech that might have raised questions was his characterization of the public struggle sessions.

> Many people in those areas that have not yet undergone mass mobilization have been subjected to the distortions [about the campaign] put forward in the propaganda of the imperialists and their lackeys. As a result, when these people hear of "public struggle sessions" [đấu], they imagine them to be horrific sessions of personal revenge.
>
> But they are not. The reason is that decree 150/SL on the establishment of Special People's Courts, promulgated on April 12, 1953, clearly states that the use of torture or physical abuse [nhục hình] such as the tying up, the beating, etc. of a landlord, is forbidden.
>
> This is the reason why peasants only organize meetings to speak of their hardships and the crimes of the cruel and despotic landlords. The peasants use the power of reason [lý lẽ] and the presentation of evidence to make the landlord confess to his crime.[356]

A key part of Hoàng Quốc Việt's approach was to play upon his audience's existing notions of the law and the role of the government and allow his listeners to think that the Party leaders saw these institutions in a similar light. For example, to address rumors about the widespread use of "torture" in the campaign, he simply stated that the Land Reform Law explicitly outlawed its use, with the assumption being that the regime saw itself as bound by laws put forward by (or rubber-stamped by) the National Assembly. Similarly, Việt mentioned the change in land reform policy in which landlords would be tried directly by the special people's courts rather than during peasant struggle sessions. The idea here was to allow residents of Hà Nội to see the Special People's Courts as they perhaps would naturally be inclined to see a court of law: as a generally conservative force, however imperfect, for the maintenance of law and order. Again, the contrast between the way that the Party leaders discussed internally the functioning of the courts (stressing their need to pronounce sentences "in time" so as not to "dampen the ardor of the peasants," instructing that land reform team leaders were to act as judges if need be, etc.) could hardly have been more contrary to the proper role ascribed to a court in the minds of many Hanoians.

Those who attended Hoàng Quốc Việt's speech on December 25 or read it three days later over three issues of *The People* were able to learn about the campaign's "differentiated" approach toward the landlord class and about the presence of Special People's Courts. But there were other crucial aspects of the campaign about which not a word was written. Nowhere in the speech did the words "Vietnamese Worker's Party" appear. Nor was there any mention of the word "collectivization" or any coded reference to the elimination of private property as the ultimate goal for rural life. There was no mention of the words "land reform brigade", "team", or "cadre". There was no mention of the words "execution" or "prison." And while Việt did make mention of "appropriate differentiated treatment" for landlords, there was no mention of the number "5.68 percent."

On January 10, 1955, less than two weeks after the publication of Hoàng Quốc Việt's article, politburo member Nguyễn Duy Trinh released a circular titled, "On Explaining Land Reform Policies to Civil Servants and New Personnel in Organizations and Government Offices of Recently Liberated Cities." According to the circular, explanations of the land reform policy provided to these anxious urban bureaucrats were to follow the basic content put forward in Việt's December 25 speech at the opera house. As the Party general secretary, Trường Chinh,

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[356] Ibid.

had instructed in his December 12, 1953 directive, Nguyễn Duy Trinh told members entrusted with explaining the policy to state that the VWP "discriminated between different types of landlords, between landlords and rich peasants." On the issue of the public struggle sessions, the circular stated: "In order to ease the fears [of civil servants and new personnel], [Party members] should speak clearly about the reasonable and sensible character of the recent struggles against cruel despotic landlord ringleaders and the current policy of establishing courts to try them." Then Nguyễn Duy Trinh instructed:

> With respect to those issues that [civil servants and new personnel] do not need to know about or, because they still have a low political level, cannot understand, or could misunderstand—we should not bring them up and explain them. (For example, our Party's general policy line for the countryside; the issue of the Party reorganization; the method of mobilizing speak bitterness sessions; etc.) Regarding those issues related specifically to the implementation of policy for Party executive committees, such as dealing with cruel, despotic reactionary landlord ringleaders, determining whether punishments should be heavy or light, and our specific tactics during the struggle with the enemy, etc.—all these things should not be brought up and explained.[357]

Eleven days later on January 21, 1955, the Party secretariat released another directive titled "On Studying the Land Reform Policy." Written by politburo member Lê Văn Lương, who was in charge of the "Party reorganization" aspect of the land reform, it stated: "The Central Committee sees that it needs to organize study sessions for cadres to learn more about the land reform policy. This is to prepare them mentally for zealous participation in and leadership of the campaign." Lương ordered that "[t]he study sessions should focus on grasping the spirit of the policy and avoid wandering into issues in too detailed a way [đi miên man vào các vấn đề quá chi tiết]." Like Nguyễn Duy Trinh, he suggested that the study sessions look at Hoàng Quốc Việt's earlier speech published for mass consumption in *The People*.

Thus it appears from these internal Party documents that the disparity between the depiction of mass mobilization in the DRV press and what actually happened in northern Vietnamese villages did not stem from a lack of knowledge of the campaign on the part of the Party leadership or the press. Rather, it resulted from a specific policy set by the Politburo to keep the true scope and character of the campaign secret. This, the Party leadership seems to have hoped, would facilitate the smooth implementation of the campaign by lowering the incidence of "spontaneous struggles" and, perhaps more importantly, potential targets "making preparations," as Nguyễn Tất Thành put it. This meant resisting or "sabotaging" the mass mobilization by unloading one's land and belongings, fleeing, or even, in the last resort, committing suicide. As for the discrepancy between the published land reform policies and those actually carried out by cadres, the Party's internal documents suggest that this was a deliberate policy. The VWP leadership appears not to have wanted cadres to learn the specific details of what being a mass mobilization cadre entailed until after the recruit had joined a rent reduction or land reform brigade—in other words, until after he or she was safely inside the Party's mass mobilization apparatus, cut off from family, friends, and the wider public.

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[357] Nguyễn Duy Trinh, "Thông tri của ban bí thư số 2- TT/TW, 10/1/1955: "Về việc giải thích chính sách cải cách ruộng đất cho các công chức, nhân viên mới ở cơ quan, công sở trong các thành thị mới giải phóng." [Circular from the Secretariat, January 10, 1955: On Explaining Land Reform Policies to Civil Servants and New Personnel in Organizations and Government Offices of Recently Liberated Cities.], *Văn kiện Đảng Toàn tập*, v. 16, 8-11.

Handling the ICC

As was 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 peasants 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.[358]

Perhaps as cover for its own violations of the Accords, the DRV produced a shrill and steady invective against alleged violations committed by the French forces and those of the Diệm regime, frequently referred to in the DRV press simply as "the opponent" [đối phương], probably for fear that use of Diệm's name would add further legitimacy to him.

In November of 1954, a month after the Party leaders had moved back to Hà Nội after nearly eight years in the maquis, the worst-case-scenario with respect to the emigration, envisioned by the Party leaders the previous month, 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 of Party leaders in Interzone III held 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 leave:

> 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 [đấu] 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].[359]

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," saying, for example, that the agricultural

[358] 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 1954*, 318-324.

[359] 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 1954*, 362.

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 method was to "use armed force or the prestige of the church in order to compel [Catholics to emigrate]." The fourth method, according to Chinh, was to "disseminate nonsensical rumors" that made 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."[360]

As usual, the Party leaders' assessments with respect to Catholics in particular and the countryside in general paid little attention to the question of how the regime's policies themselves 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 Trường 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, argued the general secretary. And "many cadres" were guilty of "not following the mass line correctly."[361] The key aspect of this conceptualization of the emigration situation was that it essentially acknowledged no agency for those who wanted to leave. The situation was caused entirely by the regime's enemies and by the alleged "deviations" committed by cadres.

Trường Chinh suggested a number of different 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 fix up churches that had been damaged during the war or left empty because of the departure of its priest and parishoners. Second, the Party general secretary 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, but, always conscious of their 'implementation' policy vis-à-vis the Geneva Accords, to do so in a way that would make the DRV appear to be the upholders of the accords as they were in fact violating them.

> [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.[362]

What the Party leaders perhaps most wanted to do was disolve holding areas (such as churches) where Catholics waiting to emigrate had congregated. Trường 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" [nhốt] for emigration. Evidently these petititions could then be shown to the ICC if it accused the DRV of preventing people from leaving. Indeed, in places where the ICC had scheduled an inspection,

[360] Ibid, 363.
[361] Ibid, 364.
[362] Ibid, 365.

Chinh instructed cadres to mobilize people to send similar petitions to the ICC, demanding that it "intervene" for family members who had been "forcibly detained."[363]

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 Hà Nội'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 would be determined by the Party leaders, but carried out by non-Communist public personalities connected with the United Vietnam Front and the DRV's Committee for the Protection of World Peace.[364] Trường 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." By claiming that the Diệm regime was "forcing" peasants to emigrate to the South, the Party leaders attempted to depict the regime in Saigon as the violators of the Accords. The hope was that the DRV's attempts to stop peasants from emigrating could then be convincingly presented not as violations of the Geneva Accords but as attempts to uphold them by protecting the right of northerners to stay in the DRV. 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."[365]

The internal directives of the Party leaders show increasing frustration at their inability to stop the emigration and an increasing willingness on their part to take bolder and riskier measures to somehow stem the flow of people. A February 16, 1955 Politburo directive (this was almost exactly three months before the 300-day period was supposed to end) warned that there was still a large number [số đông] of people 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.[366]

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[363] Ibid, 367.

[364] Trường Chinh [Đặng Xuân Khu], "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, 23/11/1954: Organizing a Meeting in the Hà Nội Opera House for the Anniversary of the 1940 Southern Uprising], *VKDTT 1954*, 375.

[365] 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 from 26/11/1954: On Creating a Large and Power Movement Comprising all Classes of the Entire Country for the Purpose of Resisting the Enemies Blatant Violations of the Geneva Accords], *VKDTT 1954*, 385.

[366] Lê Văn Lương, "Chỉ thị của bộ chính trị số 07-CT/TW ngày 16 tháng 2 năm 1955: Đẩy mạnh đấu tranh phá âm mưu mới của địch trong việc dụ dỗ và cưỡng ép giáo dân di cư vào Nam" [Poliburo Directive no. 7, Feb. 16, 1955: Step up the Struggle to Destroy the Enemy's New Scheme to Entice and Force Catholics to Emigrate South], *VKDTT 1955*, 74.

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 as follows:

> 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 Hải Phòng and lengthen the period of emigration. They want to ruin the Accords and immediately organize to force [cưỡng ép] the masses to emigrate on a large scale all at one time.[367]

On that same day, March 20, the National Assembly convened for the first time since meeting sixteen months earlier to "approve" the Party's land reform law. We will take a closer look at this fourth meeting of the National Assembly in a moment, but for now, it is important to note that Phạm Văn Đồng and Võ Nguyên Giáp both delivered long reports during the four-day session touting the DRV's "absolute" [triệt để] adherence to the Geneva Accords and the many violations of the accords committed by the "opposition" regime in Saigon.

The Party Leaders Try to Reinvigorate the Land Reform:

As we saw, during their September 1954 meeting of the Politburo, the Party leaders clarified their general strategy for handling the Geneva Accords. That strategy was full of shifts, contradictions, and ambiguities that were likely to have an impact on the mindset of cadres carrying out the campaign. First of all, the Party leaders depicted themselves publicly as strict implementers of the Accords, yet internally fumed at cadres who showed themselves reluctant to violate the Accords as a means of preventing people from leaving the North. Second, the Party leaders changed some of the language of the land reform to protect against accusations that the campaign was a violation of article 14d ("no reprisals"). At that September meeting of the Politburo, the Party leaders affirmed that, with respect to their approach to the South, they would "open up wide" their front strategy so as to attract as many landlords as possible to the anti-Ngô Đình Diệm cause. Yet at the same time, in the North, the Party leaders were calling (in more muted tones) for the destruction of the landlord class. Similarly, the Party leaders were publicly calling for the "protection of peace" while carrying out a semi-secret internal war against an alleged landlord class that comprised 5.68 percent of the countryside. In January of 1955, the Party leaders made an internal call to generate a mass campaign for the "normalization of relations" between the North and South as a precursor to the carrying out of elections in July 1956:

> On the economic front, the movement should demand the establishment of trade and business relations between North and South.
>
> On the cultural and social front, we should demand that people of the North and South [hai miền] be allowed to travel freely [between the two parts], to exchange letters, newspapers, and books, and to carry out other performance, sports, and literary activities.

[367] Communique from the Central Committee to the Zone Branches: 20/3/1955. *VKDTT 1955*, 232.

> With respect to politics, the movement should demand that mass organizations, notable personalities, and political parties [from the two sides] should be allowed to meet with each other to exchange ideas and discuss issues.[368]

The content of this "mobilization" could not have been more contrary to the spirit of the land reform and to the regime's general obsession with secrecy. Indeed, had any non-communist group in the South sent a sports team to Hà Nội to play friendly matches against a North Vietnamese team, it is likely that the visiting team would have received treatment similar to that given to Sainteny and the 100 members of his French delegation to the DRV (i.e. subject putatively invited guests to severe police surveillance and attempt to prevent regular Vietnamese people from speaking with them). The same would have been true of a DRV team sent to the South, but the difference was that Ngô Đình Diệm was not actually calling for the "normalization of relations" and would never have made such an invitation to the North.

In addition to these ambiguities and contradictions created by the realities of the Geneva Accords and the Party's handling of them, the fact of the war's end after eight exhausting years no doubt had a significant impact on the mood of DRV cadres. The Party leaders complained of a general psychological lull that had, after the initial euphoria that accompanied the end of the conflict, crept over the DRV state and population.

All these factors suggest that the Party leadership's complaints of a loss in revolutionary vigor among the land reform apparatus in the months following the Geneva Accords were genuine. Hopefully at some point in the future, access to internal records of the campaign's results will enable scholars to test whether the land reform actually did see a significant drop-off in the number of landlords brought to trial during these months or whether the narrative of "rightests deviations" increasingly employed by the Party leaders in their discussion of the campaign was simply a means of raising its revolutionary vigor to yet higher levels.

Radicalizing the Campaign by Moving the Purge up to the District Level

An effort to jolt the land reform apparatus into higher gear can be detected in the Party's published documents as early as February 3 of 1955. A directive written by Lê Văn Lương on behalf of the Party Central Committee instructed the land reform apparatus to include district-level Party members in the overall purge of the Party that accompanied the campaign. Up until then, the land reform's purge had been limited mostly to local-level (i.e. commune and village) cadres. As Lê Văn Lương stated, "the Central Committee sees that, despite having gone through rectification, through punishment and promotion, and through mass mobilization for the absolute reduction of land rents, the leading organs at the district level are still in a state of severe complexity [tình trạng phức tập nghiêm trọng]." The term "complexity" was used in a pejorative sense by the DRV leaders to denote a VWP organ that was in need of "reorganization" to make it "pure and clean" [trong sạch]. What was the explanation for this expansion upward of the Party purge?

[368] Lê Văn Lương, "Chỉ thị của Ban Bí thư số 04-CT/TW, 29/1/1955: Về việc gây một cuộc vận động lập lại quan hệ giữa hai miền Bắc và Nam giới tuyến quân sự tạm thời" [Secrtariat Directive, 29/1/1955: Creating a Mobilization Movement for the Reestablishment of Normal Relations between the North and South of the Military Demarcation Line], *VKDTT 1955*, 35.

> District-level cadres are still deeply affected by the mentality of the exploitative class. For example: they feel sorry for the landlords, think that the landlords are suffering, and whether unintentionally or intentionally, district level cadres protect the landlord by allowing him to disperse his property. They incorrectly understand [nhận thức] the meaning of "ally with the rich peasants," making peasants return interests [quyền lợi] to the rich peasant. During the rent reduction, district-level cadres use the policy of differential treatment of landlords as an excuse to skip altogether or reduce the backrents owed by cruel and despotic landlords. Cadres have contempt for the poor peasant and do not rely on him; they are not resolute with the exploitative class and they hide the crimes [of a landlord] that shows the community [bà con] that he is a cruel despot and incite [landlord] families to disperse their land, etc.
>
> In the leading offices at the district level, bad and complicated elements make up the majority or maintain the leading role. The district-level Party branch of Đại Từ [in Thái Nguyên Province] had eight members, two of whom were from the bourgeoisie and three of whom were either landlords or the child of a landlord. These elements entered the Party and did not change their political standpoint. On the contrary, on behalf of the exploitating class, they hid inside the Party and the government in order to sabotage the [mass mobilization] movement, especially the rent reduction and the land reform. They disperse land, give permission to landlords to disperse their property, and prevent the peasants from repressing [trấn áp] landlords. Members of the district-level apparatus take landlords who had been eliminated [đào thải] by the masses and have them carry out work at the district. [369]

The February directive from the Central Committee then provided an explanation of how these "bad elements" had risen so high in the Party apparatus. After the August Revolution, the landlord class had "crawled into" the Viet Minh first and then into the Party. They had begun at the commune level and then "climbed up" to the district level where they were able to "continue sabotaging the policies of the Party and Government." At the same time, Lê Văn Lương explained, these district cadres had "exploited" the weaknesses of other cadres, "love of fame, ambition for status, the practice of corruption, and a self-interested outlook," in order to "attack" the Party's cadres and to "monopolize" [lũng đoạn] the Party itself. Why had this alleged situation not been discovered earlier?

> Although through the process of rectification and the Party reorganization, punishments and promotions were carried out, these were only done based on the cadres' self-criticisms [kiểm thảo]. [This process] had not yet been combined with the help of masses and therefore brought about few results. Through the movement for rent reduction we dealt with [xử trí] a number of bad elements who had been obvious in their [bad] actions and promoted a number of good cadres. But these good cadres have not yet seized the leading role. Because the masses [during the rent reduction] have not yet been mobilized thoroughly enough as they are in the land reform, they have not yet boldly [mạnh dạn] discovered the bad elements hiding in leading offices, have not yet spoken up about all the weaknesses of cadres and leading offices…[370]

The directive's instructions about how district-level cadres were to be disciplined during the Party reorganization stated that cadres who had committed mistakes before the land reform

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[369] 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 Directive no. 5, 3/2/1955: Reorganizing the Leading Organs at the District Level during the Land Reform], *VKDTT 1955*, 39.
[370] Ibid, 40-41.

should receive "lenient" [khoan hồng] treatment, "while [cadres whose] mistakes and actions are related to the support and protection of landlords during the land reform should be dealt with severely [nghiêm khắc]." Similarly, Party members who carried out a "sincere self-criticism" were to receive "lenient" treatment, while those cadres who were "stubborn" [ngoan cố], that is, denying rather than confessing to the accusations leveled against them, were to be treated "severely." Now that they were themselves targeted by the campaign, the chance that district-level cadres would use their authority to intervene on behalf of people targeted by the campaign at the local level was significantly reduced.

The VWP's 7th Plenum: March 3-13

On March 3, a month after Lê Văn Lương's directive on purging district-level Party branches, the Party Executive began its 7th Plenum. Following standard practice, Nguyễn Tất Thành opened the meeting with a brief speech outlining the world situation and the big ideas to be covered in more depth by other speakers. Through the arrangement of ideas in his speech, Thành seemed to hint at what he preferred not to say directly. The first half of his speech was dedicated to touting the Soviet Union's "peace movement" and the "unity" of the Communist bloc, which was growing "stronger and stronger by the day." The Soviet Union's "policy of peace" was contrasted with the policy of the "American-led imperialist bloc," which was the "preparation for world war." After stressing Moscow's "world peace movement" and the broad support it had garnered the Communist bloc from people all around the world, Nguyễn Tất Thành shifted quickly to the Geneva Accords. This was probably his subtle way of explaining to the Party that their approach to the Accords needed to be and indeed was in accordance with Moscow's "peace movement." This meant that the DRV had to depict itself as peace-loving followers of the Accords and the American-backed Diệm regime as bellicose violators of them. "With respect to our side, we resolutely implement correctly the Geneva Accords and struggle to demand that our opponent also implement them correctly."

Nguyễn Tất Thành made no direct mention of the land reform in his introductory speech, using instead the phrase "consolidate the North" [củng cố miền Bắc] which, after the Geneva Accords, became a phrase used sometimes to refer to the land reform. However, he did speak of the need to "further improve" the leadership of the Central Committee and of the entire Party. "First and foremost *is leadership on the ideological front*. We need to make an effort to fix incorrect thinking, such as pacifism [tư tưởng thái bình], rightism, hedonism, the desire to rest and relax, etc."[371] These were themes that Trường Chinh expanded upon in his 79-page report delivered at the plenum.

> The number of cadres participating in the mass mobilization is growing every day, but their quality is poor. After the ceasefire, the thinking of cadres has been full of deviations, such as limiting the masses' speak bitterness sessions, fear that if the masses accuse a landlord of being a reactionary Vietnamese traitor it will be a "violation of the Geneva Accords." Many cadres have the mindset of wanting to rest and relax, have hedonistic tendencies, are afraid of difficulties and hardships, and do not want to carry out land reform anymore.

[371] Hồ Chí Minh [Nguyễn Tất Thành], "Lời khai mạc của Hồ Chủ tịch, 3/3/1955: Tại Hội nghị lần thứ 7 mở rộng Ban Chấp hành Trung ương Đảng Lao động Việt Nam (khóa II) [Chairman Hồ's Opening Statements, 3/3/1955, at the 7th Expanded Plenum of the VWP Central Executive Committee (session II)], *VKDTT 1955*, 91-93.

> In many places, the mobilization has not met the required level [không đạt được mức yêu cầu], especially in recently liberated areas. The mobilization of the peasants' thinking has not yet become truly deep and broad, with the result that in a number of communes they do not find and do not hit the mark [đánh trúng] against cruel and despotic landlord ring leaders. In many places, cadres rely blindly on the old [Party] organization, allowing landlords and their lackeys to sabotage [the campaign] and being forced to go around in circles…[372]

Trường Chinh did not say precisely to what standard the "required level" referred, but the context of the above paragraph indicates that it was likely some sort of quota of landlords set by the Party leaders for the rent reduction phase of the mass mobilization.

In the part of his report dedicated to the land reform, Chinh had started with the campaign's attack on landlords. The second part touched on the adjustment of average crop yield rates and land acreage. As we have seen, the Party's agricultural tax was calculated as a percentage of an estimated yield set by the state. One of the tasks of the land reform was to raise these estimated yields so that the Party-state could demand more desperately needed rice from the people. Chinh reported to the Central Committee that cadres were falling short in carrying out this task as well, in some places, "arbitrarily assigning" [lối gán ép] numbers upon peasants, "making a number of peasants unenthusiastic about receiving land." Thus it appears that the same dynamic that had undermined the policy of "temporary distributions" [tạm cấp] of "Vietnamese traitor" and French colonial land during the eight years after the August Revolution was now, in some cases, putting a similar damper on the land reform. "On the other hand," the Party general secretary reported, "there are places where cadres do not combine the work of land reform with the work of famine relief, agricultural production, and tax collection, meaning that the famine develops, production is neglected, and tax revenue is lost." This sort of ambiguous linear analysis (taxing the peasants too much or not enough), frequently used by the Party leaders, meant that unsatisfactory results at the local level could always be framed as deviations from an imagined correct path that the Party leaders had supposedly had in mind from the beginning.

Improving Land Reform Cadre Quality?

Trường Chinh then described a number of factors that had contributed to the unsatisfactory results of the mass mobilization over the past few months. First of all, the Party leaders from the Central Committee level down to the zone and provincial levels had "disregarded" the mass mobilization movement, frequently being distracted with other tasks. Second, with the expansion of the mass mobilization, the landlord class, argued Chinh, "increasingly used cruel and wicked ruses" to oppose the campaign. Third, in areas that had been recently taken over by the DRV from the French, "cruel and despotic landlords along with reactionary organizations" were frequently armed with weapons that had been attained from the French. Fourth, an expansion of the mass mobilization apparatus along with the conditions of the Geneva Accords had led to a reduction in the quality of land reform cadres. The Party general secretary stressed that, ultimately, although the mass mobilization had achieved "notable

[372] Trường Chinh [Đặng Xuân Khu], "Tình hình hiện tại và nhiệm vụ trước mắt: Báo cáo của đồng chí Trường Chinh ở Hội nghị Trung ương lần thứ bảy mở rộng (từ 3 đến 12-3-1955) [The Current Situation and Present Tasks: Trường Chinh's Report at the 7th Expanded Plenum (from 3-12/3/1955], *VKDTT 1955*, 121.

successes," there were weaknesses in the campaign, with the "primary weaknesses being rightist deviations."

The top Party leaders saw the land reform running out of steam to some extent, with cadres exhibiting "sluggishness" [uể oải] and a reluctance to participate in the campaign. Heads of government offices, from which land reform cadres were primarily drawn, were not to feed the campaign with "bad" and "average" staff members. To improve the quality of cadres, they needed to be "brought together early" and "trained carefully." Generally speaking, government offices were to supply the campaign with about one quarter of their staffs for work as land reform cadres.

Trường Chinh called for more efforts within the campaign itself to improve the "quality" of cadres and to reduce the incidence of "rightist deviations":

> With respect to cadres currently participating in the mass mobilization, we need to give them more eduction and training (carry out rectification after every step of the work if need be). We need to make use of the impact gained from carrying out a serious system of rewards and punishments in order to display [biểu dương] good cadres and punish cadres who wreck discipline [phá hoại kỷ luật] and create a bad influence. We also need to focus on looking after the health of cadres, and improving them after every [mass mobilization] wave.[373]

Such a desire to improve the quality of land reform cadres, to increase their education and training, to carry out more rectification within the campaign itself, would have been much easier if the Party leaders had been willing to slow the campaign down and reduce its rate of expansion. But they remained adamant that the campaign be finished by June of 1956.

In his long report to the central committee, Trường Chinh also stressed the need for tighter control of the land reform from all echelons of the Party:

> *At the same time, we need to strengthen leadership of the land reform by Party executive committees*. We need to consolidate the Party's leadership in the Land Reform Committees at all levels and within the Executive Boards of the Land Reform Brigades [Đoàn ủy]. Zone and provincial level Party secretaries absolutely must *participate in the leadership* of the rent reduction and the land reform, guaranteeing that the rent reduction and land reform attain good results and that mistakes are reduced. The system of reporting results and asking for orders [báo cáo và xin chỉ thị] must be strengthened. [Zone and provincial Party leaders] must also increase the inspection of and pressure on [đôn đốc] the leaders of the land reform brigades and land reform teams. They must fight against bureaucratism and over-delegation [khoán trắng].[374]

The Land Reform in the Larger Economic Picture of the DRV

The land reform, or issues directly related to the campaign, also received some crucial mention in parts of Trương Chinh's report devoted to discussing the overall economic situation in the North and the remedies for improving it. In Chinh's section titled, "Restoring the National Economy," he described the terrible economic conditions of the North.

[373] Ibid, 137.
[374] Ibid.

> The largest part of our economy right now is agriculture. If we want to help the economy, we need to raise agricultural production and create the conditions for the development of industry. We need to complete land reform, but up to now in the North we have only carried out rent reduction in half of the communes and land reform in less than one fifth.
>
> Natural disasters have been frequent and enemy-inflicted damage remains.Today, many places are suffering from famine, especially in Interzone 4, where famine conditions are developing and becoming critical. In a number of places, people have starved to death. The number of beggars and the number of people who, as a result of hunger, have become sick or lost the strength to work, has risen a lot.[375]

Here, the general secretary implied that some of the economic difficulties were a result of the fact that half of the communes in the North had not yet undergone rent reduction and over four fifths had not yet undergone land reform.

Yet, apparently because of the regime's ideological commitment to collectivized agriculture, the Party general-secretary could not speak in such glowing terms of the benefits of the land reform for places that had already carried out the campaign. Indeed, Trường Chinh appears to have been determined to frame the results of the campaign in such a way that they would suggest the necessity of a near immediate move to collectivization. After having brought "freedom and land" to the peasants through the land reform, he explained, the peasants "had the potential to take the road to collectivized agriculture, however, they also had spontaneous capitalist tendencies." As such, if the Party did not intervene "in time" and "guide" the peasants to collectivization, Chinh warned, "they will either go down the capitalist road or return to feudalism." That was the ideological explanation for collectivization.

For those who were not as interested or compelled by the ideological reason, however, Chinh provided a practical reason why the move was necessary:

> Another big change after the land reform is that many landless peasants became poor peasants, many poor peasants became middle peasants, and the living standard of a number of middle peasants became level with that of rich peasants. As a result of this improvement in their lives, the peasants have a tendency to hold on to and not sell their agricultural products, etc., impacting the supply of food to the cities and the economic exchange between the cities and the countryside.
>
> Therefore, in those communes that have undergone land reform, we need to mobilize [the peasants] to establish work-exchange groups [tổ đổi công], to build supply and consumption cooperatives, and implement a planned credit policy. We need to educate the peasants and bring them gradually down the road to collectivization. At the same time, we also need to buy rice at a set price in order to guarantee the supply for the cities and to encourage the cities to carry out economic exchange with the countryside, to supply industrial goods to the countryside.[376]

The intention of the DRV state to buy rice from the countryside "at a set price" implied a few crucial things. First, whatever good will was earned from peasants through the redistribution of land during the mass mobilization was going to be significantly dampened by the fact of their

[375] Ibid, 119.
[376] Ibid, 110.

being forced to "sell" their rice to the DRV state at below market price. The harsh reality of the DRV's grim economic situation, especially the threat of famine, came up repeatedly in Trường Chinh's report:

> If we want to restore the economy, we need to shore up our financial situation and stabilize commodity prices. But at the moment, we do not collect enough revenue for our expenditures [thu chưa đủ để chi]. This situation is negatively impacting prices and the market. With respect to a number of products, especially food products, supply and demand have at times been irreconcilable. The state has too little food. [Our department of] National Commmerce [Mậu dịch quốc doanh] does not have enough rice to control prices and guarantee supply to the cities. During the period between harvests [giáp hạt], the price of rice will rise higher, the hunger situation will become more serious. Without stabilizing our currency and prices, we cannot restore our economy in a rapid fashion.[377]

For the foreseeable future, then, the DRV state was going to need to squeeze every last extra grain of rice possible (and, as had been the case during the war, more than a few grains that were not extra) out of the countryside. The DRV state did not yet have any reliable way of making money, meaning that the extraction of scarce agricultural products from the rural masses of the North, along with any precious aid from the Soviet Bloc, were about it. During the eight years of war, the Party leaders had grown tired of having to ask peasants for their rice. Agricultural collectivization would turn the tables of this dynamic around completely, putting peasants in a position of having to ask the state for their food to eat. Gaining near absolute control over the food supply in the DRV would give the Party leverage over the population that would make mobilization for war a much more predictable and reliable endeavor than had been the case during the recent struggle with the French Union forces.

In the near term, though, Trường Chinh's comment about the need to buy rice at a "fixed price" meant that the Party would need to repress other potential buyers of the peasants' agricultural products who were willing to pay market price. As we saw during the war, the Party frequently carried out campaigns against "hoarding and speculation," named such to give a criminal coloring to the desire of peasants to hang on to their rice rather than sell it to the state below market price. Indeed, Chinh, in his report's section devoted to famine relief work, once again encouraged Party leaders to cast in a criminal light actions that were not in accordance with the regime's prescriptions for how the difficult economic situation was to be combatted. "We need to inspect and carry out repression against the enemy's actions of sabotage against the rice crop and agricultural yields in order to protect them. At the same time, we need to punish the ringleaders, those who hoard rice, who intentionally make the famine worse."[378] The purpose of this order appears to have been to create in the minds of the peasants the idea that any sort of uncooperative or disobedient economic behavior on their part might lead to an accusation that they were enemy agents, spies, or traitors.

The reality of the economic situation as a whole suggested that, whether through an agricultural tax, a compulsory sale of rice to the state at a fixed price, or, eventually through agricultural collectivization, the peasants were going to continue to be hungry most of the time—regardless of what happened in the land reform.

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[377] Ibid, 119.
[378] Ibid, 139.

Grumblings about the Land Reform among Central Committee Members?

In the officially published collection of Party documents, there occasionally appear summaries of official "discussions" [cuộc thảo luận] alleged to have taken place among members of the Central Committee during important meetings. My sense is that these discussions were disseminated to promote the idea that there was "democracy" within the Party, that members of the Central Committee actually had some say in the formulation of policy. What appears usually in these published "discussions," however, is the correction of "erroneous" thoughts and the coming to a "unified appraisal" among the Central Committee about aspects of policies developed by the top Party leaders (the Politburo). It remains to be determined whether the "erroneous" ideas and appraisals advanced by members of the Central Committee actually occurred or whether they were imagined by the top Party leaders as likely to have been in the minds of many rank-and-file members.

The section of the "discussion" devoted to the land reform suggests that there were mixed feelings about the campaign:

> Our discussion has led us to a unified appraisal of the following issues:
>
> - At the moment, is the land reform a central task with a decisive character to it? Yes.
> - Are the successes of the land reform predominant or its weaknesses? The successes are predominant.
> - Since the establishment of peace, has the mass mobilization been better or worse? It has been worse. Why? Because the executives committees of our Party have not led it tightly; they have either been complacent or seen the land reform as unimportant. The quality of our cadres has declined while the quantity has increased, leading to many deviations. And the campaign has been worse because the landlords brazenly sabotage the campaign while we have not yet repressed them appropriately, etc.
> - The principle problem with the campaign is rightist deviations or "leftist" deviations. Mostly rightist deviations, while "leftist" deviations have their origin in rightest deviations or are only a camouflage for rightist deviations.
> - […]
> - The Central Committee needs to make the policy more concrete and needs to lead [the land reform] more closely.
> - Should the [mass mobilization] plan be left as it is? It needs to be left as it is but be implemented with more determination. […][379]

Then the summary of the "discussion" turned away from this question-and-answer form and began to deal directly with some of the ideas apparently put forward by Central Committee members at the ten-day meeting. One of those ideas was that the Party leadership should be more concerned about avoiding "leftist errors." The writer of the summary stated that "a number of comrades, because of their zeal to prevent leftist errors and complacency, have put forward for criticism a number of 'left' deviationist incidents." The top Party leaders, as reflected in the

[379] Trường Chinh, "Kết luận cuộc thảo luận ở Hội nghị Trung ương lần thứ bảy (Họp từ ngày 3 đến ngày 12-3-1955)" [Conclusions of the Discussion at the 7th Plenum of the Central Committee (Held from 3-12/3/1955)], *VKDTT 1955*, 191.

"discussion" summary, acknowledged that any "mistake," whether "leftist" or "rightist," should be "corrected." However, the document explained, "when the most common and most serious weaknesses of the movement are rightist deviations, and we only put forward and criticize 'leftist' deviations, then we are not reflecting the general objective reality of the movement…"[380]

> Moreover, there are comrades who criticize [our] intervention into the way landlords are addressed, who complain that the poor peasants are arrogant and cocky [lên mặt]. They do this without saying anything about the crimes of the landlords, who are brazenly acting against the mass mobilization: strangling people, poisoning denouncers [khổ chủ], burning the houses of backbone elements, throwing grenades into peasant meetings, hitting or killing cadres. [These comrades] do not criticize those land reform teams that commit rightist deviations in the work of repressing the acts of landlords. There are comrades who bring up many things, even things that happened before the rent reduction, which are all stuffed into a ball with the land reform. The conclusion that they come to makes listeners think that the rural situation in the North right now is "chaotic" [hỗn loạn] and that the land reform has veered off track [lệch lạc].
>
> After discussions, many comrades recognized that to say [the rural situation] is "chaotic" is not correct, but they still hold that the rural situation is not yet stabilized because of the land reform. Yes, the situation truly has yet to stabilize. That is because we are carrying out a land revolution, we are overthrowing a feudal land tenure system that is thousands of years old in our country. The typhoon is blowing strongly, the peasants are rising up. An earth-shaking class warfare is taking place. How can it be stable? But in those communes that have undergone land reform, the situation is more stable than it was under the feudal regime. And if there are any communes where the "chaotic" situation is the result of our not yet having carried out land reform there, then the cruel and despotic landlords are still making rain [làm mưa làm gió] with the peasants.
>
> The peasants have had to get on their knees and bow their heads under the feudal yoke for centuries; now they are awakening and throwing off the yoke. Of course they are going to be arrogant to their enemy. They do not want to and they cannot call their class enemy "sir" and "madam". And if they act a little bit excessively with their enemy then we, first and foremost, must be understanding of just how great their hatred is. We can only recommend that they correct [their excessive acts], and our cadres in particular must not follow the tail of the masses and act rashly. But in correcting, we also must be skillful, making sure not to dump cold water over the movement, dampening the masses' spirit of struggle.[381]

The Politburo's "Conclusion of Discussion" stressed that the "most worrisome" thing was not a few "leftist deviations" but land reform cadres committing "rightist deviations," which meant not daring to "completely" mobilize the masses and "totally" overthrow the landlord class. The next section of the document suggests that some members of the Central Committee were simply not on board with the philosophy behind the land reform, particularly the role of revolutionary violence:

> There are comrades who request that we expand the possibility of donating land to all who are not cruel and despotic [landlords], but we cannot carry out land reform peacefully. Why not?

[380] Ibid, 192.
[381] Ibid, 193.

> There are comrades who request that we reconsider the standards for determining who belongs to the landlord class. They request that we only call people landlords if they own over a certain amount of land. This is an important issue [vấn đề lớn]…[382]
>
> There are comrades who request a reconsideration of the land reform policy with respect to religion, who request a reconsideration of the speak bitterness sessions, etc.
>
> There are comrades who request that we reconsider the implementation of the Party's line and policy in the countryside.
>
> These ideas have things about them that are mistaken, and they have been rejected by our brothers and sisters [of the Central Committee]. There are also things about these ideas that are correct. And our brothers and sisters have requested that the Politburo investigate them. The Politburo will investigate. But [the Politburo] needs to remind comrades of one thing: although the situation in our country has its special characteristic, the ideology behind policies [tư tưởng chính sách] must be firmly grasped:
>
> - The things that cannot be changed;
> - And the things that can be changed.
>
> And we can be flexible only to a certain point. If we go past that point we violate our principles.[383]

In the months following the conclusion of the campaign, a famous legal scholar who worked for the DRV state, Nguyễn Mạnh Tưởng, would deliver a highly critical speech about the violence of the land reform. According to the controversial RVN intellectual Hoàng Văn Chí, in Nguyễn Mạnh Tưởng's speech, a copy of which has never been secured, the DRV legal scholar claimed that an internal slogan of the land reform had been, "better to kill ten innocent people than to let one guilty person escape." In my research, I never came across this saying in any of the land reform documents that I examined. Neither did the scholar Alex Vo, who also spent considerable time researching the land reform in the archives and has collected a large amount of internal Party documents related to the campaign. What is disturbing to most people about the "better to kill…" phrase, as was pointed out by Nguyễn Mạnh Tưởng, is the low value of human life that it reflects.

We can see, though, that while the official internal discourse on the land reform is not as brutal and crude as "better to kill…", it nevertheless has a similar dehumanizing spirit that comes through clealry in the language of "deviations". From a humanistic perspective, a "rightist deviation", which meant 'going too easy' on the landlord class, cannot be seen in any way as comparable to a "leftist deviation," which meant punishing or killing a person who, according to the Party's criteria, should not have been. This seems to have been the idea expressed to the VWP Politburo by some Central Committee members during the meeting about the land reform, and which was refuted by the Politburo's insistence that "rightist deviations" were the greater evil.

The National Assembly Meets: March 20-27, 1955

[382] The ellipsis was in the original text from VKD, indicating that a part of the original document may have been cut out by the editors of the series.
[383] Ibid, 193-194.

The Central Committee's 7th Plenum was held from March 3 to March 13. Having presented the new policies to the Central Committee, the Politburo could then present them, or some version of them, to the National Assembly, whose fourth meeting since 1946 was held a week later, from March 20-27. It had been a long time, yet again, since the National Assembly had met, with the last meeting occurring in December of 1953 for the purpose of ratifying the land reform law. It is unclear when Nguyễn Tất Thành, Phạm Văn Đồng, Trường Chinh, and the other top Party leaders decided that the National Assembly would meet on March 20, 1955 (its fourth meeting in nine years). At that time, the Party leaders had not come up with a set schedule for the National Assembly, so the chosen date must have had some significance. Much of the Party's propanda was dedicated to instructing people how to interpret moves made by the DRV state. As such, sometimes the propaganda provides insights into the strategic considerations behind the holding of a certain meeting, the introduction of a new movement, or, in this case, the meeting of the National Assembly. An article in *The People* instructed readers to view the meeting as a sign of the DRV state's "maturation" [trưởng thành] and as an indicator of how the "international position of the DRV was being strengthened every day." It ended by stressing that "this session of the National Assembly would decide specific domestic and foreign policies with an eye toward consolidating peace, unifying the country, completing its independence [hoàn thành độc lập] and establishing democracy for the whole country…"[384]

Some of the titles of articles about the meeting of the National Assembly published in *The People* give a sense of the function of that powerless political body. During the first few days of the seven-day session, the articles focused on creating a picture of joyous celebration of and intense interest in the National Assembly meeting by the Vietnamese people: "The Entire People Celebrate the Fourth Session of the National Assembly," "Workers, Emloyees, and Cadres from Quảng Bình Celebrate the National Assembly in a Practical Way," "China Pays Special Attention to the 4th Session of the Vietnamese National Assembly." By March 25, the coverage had shifted to a focus on the National Assembly's (almost always unanimous and enthusiastic) approval of various policies: "During Yesterday's Meeting, 24/3/1955, the National Assembly Unanimously Approved the Conclusions and Requests of the Subcommittee for the Ceasefire Accords," "The Fourth Meeting of the National Assembly has Succeeded Magnificently," "The National Assembly Unanimously Approved all of the Policies of the Government and has Shown Total Faith and Absolute Support for Chairman Ho and the Government." And then, after the conclusion of the National Assembly, there usually came two or three articles explaining how people should interpret the significance of the session: "The Success of the Fourth Meeting of the National Assembly has a Great Impact on the Entire Political Struggle of the People," "The National Assembly Makes an Appeal to People throughout the Nation."[385] These articles on the National Assembly were accompanied by two long reports delivered at the National Assembly by Phạm Văn Đồng ("The Current Situation and Past Work")[386] and Võ Nguyên Giáp ("Implementation of the Geneva Accords over the Past Eight Months"),[387] with one of the main ideas being the DRV's "absolute" [triệt để] implementation of the accords.

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[384] "Chiều hôm qua, Quốc hội đã họp phiên lần thứ 2" [Yesterday, the National Assembly Held its Second Session], *Nhân dân* [The People], no. 384, March 21, 1955.

[385] These articles may all be found on the front pages of the Party newspaper

[386] Phạm Văn Đồng, "Tình hình và công tác đã qua" [The Current Situation and Past Work], *Nhân dân*, no. 387, March 24, 1955.

[387] Võ Nguyên Giáp, "Tình hình thi hành Hiệp định Giơ-ne-vơ trong tám tháng vừa qua" [Implementation of the Geneva Accords over the Past Eight Months], *Nhân dân* [The People], no. 388, March 25, 1955.

Nguyễn Tất Thành also produced a couple of articles about the National Assembly under his pseudonym "C.B.". The first was titled "Our National Assembly and their 'National Assembly,'"[388] with "their" national assembly being that of the Ngô Đình Diệm regime. Of course, the DRV National Assembly had been formed with a "free election" and was the "legitimate representative of the Vietnamese people." Nguyễn Tất Thành [C.B.] adopts a contemptuous tone in his description of how the Ngô Đình Diệm National Assembly was to be put together, but the DRV leader must have quietly appreciated the essential similarity in the approach used by Diệm to his own approach after seizing power in 1945. Thus Nguyễn Tất Thành derides Ngô Đình Diệm, for example, for apparently planning to "appoint" 88 out of the 257 members of the National Assembly. "This means," Nguyễn Tất Thành explained, that they will be "Diệm's neighbors, friends, family members, and supporters [vây cánh]," as though he, Trường Chinh, Phạm Văn Đồng, Võ Nguyên Giáp, and others of the top Party leadership had not carefully done the exact same thing with the composition of the DRV National Assembly after taking power in 1945 (arguably to a far greater degree). Nguyễn Tất Thành also derided the Ngô Đình Diệm regime for planning to allot 60 seats to important organizations and religious groups, one assumes that this meant the Cao Đài, Hòa Hỏa, Buddhist, and Catholic religious groups. "These will be the representatives of these groups, of course not the general representatives of the people." The idea of the "national interest" being a conciliation of sorts between different domestic interests seems to have been about as anathema to Ngô Đình Diệm as it was to Nguyễn Tất Thành, with the former soon using his new, American-supplied military equipment to crush rather than compromise with the religious groups of the South.

Thành's second article provided a description of the opening ceremony of the National Assembly, explaining how readers were to interpret various episodes. Despite the fact that hundreds of thousands of Northerners had already left for the South, in no small part because of the spread of famine in the DRV, Thành was careful to create a narrative of Southern suffering, as though life were much better in the North. "When greeting the National Assembly and speaking about our compatriots in the South who are bravely struggling under conditions of great difficulty, Chairman Hồ became choked up and emotional [nghẹn ngào, cảm động]." Perhaps worried that the exodus of Northerners to the South would be seen as a sign of disunity in the DRV, Thành apparently hoped that the meeting of the National Assembly would create just the opposite impression:

> When the people's delegations came to celebrate the National Assembly, the entire assembly hall rose and welcomed them enthusiastically. Chairman Hồ, Mr. Tôn Đức Thắng, and Deputy Prime Minister Phạm Văn Đồng, on behalf of the National Assembly, warmly thanked the people of Hà Nội. Chairman Hồ kissed the young girl Nguyễn Thị Tỵ, a children's representative, and presented a bouquet of flowers to 84 year-old Mr. Bùi Phát Tưởng, a representative of senior citizens in Hà Nội. The National Assembly burst out again in thunderous applause.
>
> That shows again the warm spirit of unity between the people, the National Assembly, and our Government.[389]

[388] C.B. [Nguyễn Tất Thành], "Nói mà nghe" [Speak and Listen], *Nhân dân* [The People], no. 385, March 22, 1955.
[389] C.B. [Nguyễn Tất Thành], "Nói mà nghe: Hôm Quốc hội khai mạc" [Speak and Listen: The Opening Day of the National Assembly Meeting], *Nhân dân* [The People], no. 387, March 24, 1954.

On the afternoon of the first day of the National Assembly, one of the key implementers of the land reform, Hồ Viết Thắng, a member of the Central Land Reform Committee and the vice-minister of agriculture, delivered a long report on the campaign. According to the coverage of the report in *The People*, Thắng discussed some of the recent changes to the land reform law that had been officially made by Phạm Văn Đồng on March 1. Sections of the recent changes to the land reform law were published in the March 20, 1955 issue of *The People*, meaning that members of the National Assembly could have read about the changes in the Party's newspaper the morning before hearing about them from Thắng in the afternoon—a small but not insignificant detail that reflects the entirely ceremonial role of the National Assembly in DRV political life.

A few of the changes to the land reform law are worth noting for what they reflect about the campaign. First of all, back in late December, Hoàng Quốc Việt had argued that there were three ranks of "cruel and despotic landlords," with only the highest rank being tried before the special people's courts. Below these three types of landlord had been seven other lesser types, all treated more or less leniently. Three months later, Phạm Văn Đồng had simplified things considerably. Now there were only four types of landlords: 1) Democratic and patriotic notables 2) Resistance-war landlords 3) Normal landlords 4) Cruel and Despotic Landlords. The categories had been shrunk from ten to four. Moreover, whereas Hoàng Quốc Việt had stressed that only the level-one cruel and despotic landlords would be tried, Phạm Văn Đồng now stressed that "any" landlord could be brought before a special people's court:

> When mobilizing the masses to implement the Government's land policy, any landlord, if he has either a plan or carries out actual actions to sabotage the implementation of land policy, to harm the lives or property of the peasants, or if after the ceasefire he continues to sabotage unity, sabotage defense work, will all be investigated before the special people's court according to decree 151 of 12/4/1953 on punishments for landlords who resist the law during the mass mobilization.[390]

There was also some clarification on how "industrialist landlords" and other, what we might call 'absentee landlords,' were to be treated during the campaign. These were people who had spent the majority of the conflict in Hà Nội or Hải Phòng under the protection of the French Union and the State of Vietnam. As Phạm Văn Đồng explained, these industrialist-landlords needed to reduce rents and pay back rents during the rent reduction phase of the campaign. This meant being escorted back to one's village or the village where one happened to own land, sometimes after having been away for years, and facing the community in the middle of mobilization. As for the land reform phase of the campaign, Phạm Văn Đồng stated that, "generally speaking, [industrialist-landlords] are not called back to the countryside to have their class determined by the peasants, and their land will be compulsorily purchased [trưng mua]." If fortunate enough not to be called back to the countryside, these "industrialist-landlords" needed to write a letter to their community "admitting that their class status was industrialist-landlord and providing an inventory of all their land, buffalos, and farm equipment."

In other words, the Party leaders wanted these industrialists to publicly recognize the new regime's right to assign them (and everybody in society) to an official class. Perhaps the official

[390] Deputy Prime Minister Phạm Văn Đồng, "Bổ sung và sửa đổi về chính sách phát động quần chúng giảm tô và cải cách ruộng đất" [Supplementing and Ammending the Mass Mobilization through Rent Reduction and Land Reform Policy], *Nhân dân* [The People], no. 383, March 20, 1955.

letter back to a rural community "admitting" one's class status would contribute to teaching members of that community to see the world through the lens of class, reducing possible feelings of admiration for or solidarity with a member of the village who had been successful in the 'big city'. Such-and-such a person was to be seen simply as an "industrialist-landlord" rather than, for example, the wealthy, successful relative of some important village family.

Phạm Văn Đồng announced that it was possible for residents of "large urban areas" to donate land as long as they were not "cruel and despotic landlords." However, the reassuring character of this statement was greatly reduced by the clause immediately following it: "In absolutely any situation, if a landlord wants to donate land, he must receive the approval of local peasants and the provincial land reform committee." Again, one way or another, everybody's fate was placed in the hands of the land reform apparatus.[391]

The Last Two Months of the 300-Day Period: The Final Push against the Emigration

The outward symbols of public faith in the DRV regime highlighted by Nguyễn Tất Thành in his articles on the National Assembly written under the pseudonym "C.B." were an inaccurate reflection of his and the VWP leadership's assessment of the actual situation on the ground. The resolution of the Central Committee's 7th Plenum, for example, produced only a few days before the National Assembly meeting, spoke of the need for increased attention to police work. "Public security organs at all levels must continue to be strengthened so that they can work in tandem with the military, local militias, and mass mobilization teams to uncover reactionary organizations, to eliminate traitors, and liquidate bandits."[392] Moving forward with the land reform, the task of "uncovering" or "discovering" [khám phá ra] alleged "reactionary organizations" would become a key focus of the campaign.

As noted earlier, the months of March and April, before the May harvest, were typically times of food shortages as the rice stores from the preceding October harvest began to run dry. A Central Committee directive written by Lê Văn Lương suggests that the food situation had worsened: "many people have lost their strength, suffer from sickness, and there have been people who have starved to death. Even in places carrying out land reform, there have been people dying from starvation."[393] The directive admitted that the Party leaders had "underestimated" the seriousness of the situation. Lương explained the high stakes of getting control over the spreading famine:

> If we allow the famine to spread and lengthen, it will be extremely damaging for us. The majority of the hungry people are working peasants and the vast majority are poor peasants. They are the basic force of the revolution. If that force is reduced, it will not only create difficulties for us in restoring production, but also have a huge influence on our construction of the military, our consolidation of national defense, and our implementation of the mass mobilization through rent reduction and land reform. The enemy could also use the famine to strengthen its work of forcing and enticing the emigration [to the South] and gain influence over us with the masses.

[391] Ibid.
[392] "Nghị quyết của Hội nghị Trung ương lần thứ bảy mở rộng (3-12/3/1955)" [Resolution of the Central Committee's 7th Expanded Plenum (3-12/1955)] *VKDTT 1955*, 213.
[393] Lê Văn Lương, "Chỉ thị của Trung ương số 12-CT/TW, 9/4/1955: Tăng cường lãnh đạo chống đói và giải quyết nạn đói" [Central Committee Directive no. 12, 9/4/1955: Strengthen Leadership of Anti-Famine Efforts and Solve the Problem of Famine], *VKĐTT 1955*, 241.

> Under the people's democratic regime, allowing a serious famine to develop would have a negative political impact domestically, with [people] in the South, and with [people] internationally.[394]

In areas that were carrying out the mass mobilization, Lê Văn Lương explained, if a team found that a commune was in the throes of serious famine, the team was to temporarily put off rent reduction or land reform in order to focus on mobilizing the community to increase production for famine relief. When the hunger situation was considered to be under control, the cadres could shift back to the mass mobilization. Lương's Central Committee directive also stressed the need for zone-level and provincial-level Party leaders to "concentrate their forces" on the task of combatting the famine. In places where the famine situation was most serious, the directive instructed, "all forces must be mobilized: cadres from different sectors, cadres from the military, and all available means, all methods, to [resolve the situation] quickly with no dawdling."[395]

A week later on April 16, the Party secretariat sent a telegraph to zone Party leaders stating that "the hunger situation in many places has not been reduced, and there are places where it has worsened." The telegraph stated that "Chairman Hồ" had ordered that the famine-relief work "be seen as a campaign," with famine as an "enemy" that needed to be "defeated." The telegram also noted that the Central Committee had assigned "Hồ Viết Thắng," the Party leadership's key implementer of the land reform, to be responsible for famine relief. This "concentration of forces" on the famine, the assignment of Hồ Viết Thắng to the task of famine relief, along with the disruptions to the campaign caused by the need to avoid the ICC and stop further emigrations, probably created delays for the land reform campaign that made completing it by the self-imposed June 1956 deadline difficult.

The fear among the Party leaders of a massive surge of people wanting to emigrate during the final month of the 300-day period or, worse yet, an extension of the free travel period forced upon the regime by international pressure, seems to have reached a feverish pitch as the official May 18, 1955 deadline approached. On April 21, 1955, with three and half weeks remaining before the official closure of the borders, Trường Chinh sent an internal directive to Party members on the issue of emigration. The "enemy", he explained, wanted to accomplish two things during April and May:

1. *Try to find our weakpoints in order to conclude that we have violated the accords*, to find a reason to appeal before the nine countries [that signed the Geneva Accords]. The enemy wants to demand that the time of emigration be expanded, leading toward the sabotage of many other clauses of the Geneva Accords.
2. *Push the Catholics to demand that they be allowed to go to the South in huge large numbers*. The enemy could create incidents with concentrations of armed people demanding to emigrate to the South so as to create the conditions to slander us as having prevented people from emigrating.

[394] Ibid, 242.
[395] Ibid, 251.

But the VWP leaders saw the "enemy scheme" as having longer and more widespread goals than the just "forcing and enticing" Catholics to emigrate on a large scale over the final weeks of the 300-day period of free travel.

> But the enemy scheme is not limited to the time from now until they leave the Hải Phòng [staging area], and it is not limited to the issue of emigration. The enemy is exploiting Clause 14d [on freedom of travel and residence] in order to sabotage our mass mobilization through land reform. After the period of regroupment, they will exploit the issue of North-South relations in order to continue pulling people [to the South]. They intend to *send the vast majority of the Catholic population to the South*. Using the church system, they intend to find a way of disrupting our home front, creating the basis for spies, creating uprisings in places where we are weak so as to create a negative political impact for us. They want to sabotage the unification of our country.[396]

Trường Chinh stated that since the creation of "Anti- forced-emigration work teams" [Đội công tác chống cưỡng ép di cư] and a February 1955 "meeting of cadres for work against the enemy's efforts to force the emigration" [hội nghị cán bộ chống địch cưỡng ép di cư], there had been some "improvement" in the situation. "However," he warned, "the situation is still critical." There were still a "great number" of Catholics who wanted to emigrate, especially along the coastal areas, and the VWP was still in a "reactive position, running after the enemy to deal with him." What was the actual situation with the emigration? In his study of the emigration, John Prados writes:

> A peak occurred in September when 10,000 people arrived in Saigon on a single day. That month nearly 101,000 people moved by sea. On October 2, the 400,000th person left Tonkin. After that, numbers began to decline steadily—75,000 in October, 46,500 in November, 24,500 in December. An additional 82,000 moved during the first three months of 1955.[397]

We can see from Prados's figures that there was a significant dropoff in emigrations after October 1954. To what extent was this the result of fewer people demanding to leave and to what extent was it the result of more vigorous efforts made by the Party to prevent people from leaving? We may never know, though it is interesting to note that, despite the significant drop-off in emigrations by April of 1955, the Party leaders still considered the situation to be "critical."

Trường Chinh assigned blame for this situation on the Central Committee's plan, which was "heavy on defense instead of proactively attacking the enemy," and its failure to mobilize enough forces for the task of fighting against the emigration. There was also not enough cooperation, the general-secretary stressed, between the forces charged with preventing the emigration and other branches of the government. Chinh singled out the land reform apparatus for criticism: "The Central Land Reform Committee and both the Rent Reduction and Land Reform Brigades have not yet recognized that they must work to prevent the emigration in order to guarantee the victory of mass mobilization for rent reduction and for land reform."[398]

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[396] Trường Chinh, "Chỉ thị của Ban Bí thư số 16-CT/TW, 21/4/1955: Tăng cường chỉ đạo, tích cực đấu tranh phá âm mưu địch cưỡng ép và dụ dỗ giáo dân di cư" [Secretariat Directive no. 16, 21/4/1955: Strengthen Command and Zealously Struggle to Destroy the Enemy's Plan to Force and Entice Catholics to Emigrate], *VKDTT 1955*, 268-269.
[397] Prados, "The Numbers Game..."
[398] Trường Chinh, "21/4/1955 Directive," 269-70.

Earlier in his directive, the general secretary had mentioned that a goal of the "enemy's" efforts to convince people to emigrate was to "sabotage the victory" of the land reform. What did that mean? The answer seems to lie in a subsequent section of his directive:

> *[We need to]continue to allow a number of people who are "determined to go" to be able to go.* We need to continue to publicize Clause 14d, the Announcement of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the Communiqué of the Ministry of Public Security about the procedures [thể thức] for leaving in places where they have not yet been publicized. After we have explained clearly and helped to solve difficulties related to their lives, and there is still a person who is "determined to go," then we need to organize for him to go. [Cadres] must fight against two tendencies: using orders to prevent [people from emigrating] or opening the door up widely, supplying people with departure permission slips in an uncontrolled way [bừa bãi]. With respect to landlords, generally speaking, we do not let them go and we must create enough legal reasons for holding them in the North, especially the treacherous and cruel ones. We should wait until the mass mobilization and deal with them then. If a special situation arises such that the International Control Commission comes to inspect and there is a landlord who asks to go, [the local authorities] must ask for orders from the provincial Party bureau. If this happens in a locality that is in the middle of mass mobilization then permission must be obtained from the [Land Reform] Brigade bureau [Đoàn ủy]. Local cadres must not cause the peasant masses to lose a struggle target by allowing a landlord to emigrate.[399]

Thus it appears that one of the VWP leadership's key concerns about the impact of the emigration was its potential to deprive the regime of targets for struggle in the land reform. Indeed, this remains one of the most intriguing questions about the land reform that hopefully will one day be answered by scholars with access to transcripts of Politburo discussions of the campaign. Nguyễn Tất Thành, Trường Chinh, Phạm Văn Đồng, and other top Party leaders must have known that densely populated parts of the Red River Delta to the east of Hà Nội, within easy striking distance of Route 5 leading directly to Hải Phòng, had had months to hear rumors about the land reform campaign. With such easy access to Hải Phòng and ships to the South, people in this region who feared becoming targets of the campaign had plenty of time to leave. Surely there would have to be relatively fewer "landlords" in this region.[400]

According to the April 21 directive, there were 1,300 cadres carrying out anti-emigration work in areas heavily populated with Catholics where there was still an "emigration movement." The directive stated that an addition 2,700 cadres were to be sent into these places to bolster the 1,300 already there. Trường Chinh also called for military units to be sent to these places where emigration remained a danger.[401]

Two days later on April 23, Politburo member Nguyễn Duy Trinh wrote a supplemtary communique to the April 21 directive written by Chinh, stressing again the seriousness of the emigration situation and the need to recognize the "urgent" character of efforts to prevent a mass exodus of Catholics during the last month before the DRV leaders were allowed by the Geneva Accords to stop letting people leave. Nguyễn Duy Trinh called for Party leaders at the zone and province levels to establish "Steering committees" [Ban chỉ đạo] for carrying out the anti-emigration work during the final few weeks. These committees were to be run by a member of

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[399] Ibid, 273.
[400] This is a situation described in Tô Hoài's *Ba Người Khác.*
[401] Ibid, 274-275.

either the zone or province Party standing committee and include cadres from the following branches: youth, peasant, and women's mobilization, public security, propaganda, and Catholic mobilization.

> 3. The number of cadres carrying out [anti-emigration] work in the zones has increased a great deal. In every zone there are now thousands of cadres. Their mental state [tình hình tư tưởng] is complicated, with [many] wary of difficulties, wary of hardships, their minds not yet settled for work. The level of the cadres is low, with the majority of them being Party members, team leaders, and even members of the masses who are outside the Party and lack work experience. This situation requires that the leadership of Party executives over the anti-emigration campaign must be truly tight in order to fix in a timely manner the weaknesses in thinking and in action of these cadres—to assure the success of their work.
> 4. Party members must adhere strictly to the system of reporting to and requesting directives from the Central Committee (a report once a week). Any place that is visited by the ICC needs to report [to the Central Committee] every day, and if there is anything essential, Party members must come directly to the Central Committee to report and ask for directions.[402]

By this time, Ngô Đình Diệm had become much more interested in taking full advantage of the propaganda bonanza that the period of free travel and the migration of hundreds of thousands of Northerners to the South provided to his fledgling regime in Saigon. In early May, he had sent a petition to the nine signatories of the Geneva Accords complaining that the DRV regime was taking active steps to prevent Northerners from moving to the South. In that petition, he requested again that the period of free travel be extended. In response to this official petition, the DRV leaders had the Ministry of the Interior release an announcement proclaiming, among other things, that it had "implemented correctly" the part of the Geneva Accords "guaranteeing people the freedom to choose where they live." The "concrete deeds" that proved this, according to the announcement, were the broad dissemination among the people of clause 14d, a "communique" and "directive" from the Ministry of Public Security describing the "simple" procedures required of people to "easily" obtain a passport.

Three days later, *The People* published an article titled "Who Violates the Accords? Who Respects Freedom of Movement?" It condemned the alleged efforts of its "opponent" to "force" Northerners to emigrate. "The last few months, many concrete truths have proved that our regime respects [people's] freedom of movement and freedom to choose where they live; and we always strictly implement the Geneva Accords." Yet the internal Party discourse again paints a different picture. On May 1, only three days after the newspaper article discussed above, an internal Central Committee communiqué warned Party members:

> Looking at the situation in Nam Định and a number of other provinces, the Central Committee sees that the situation with regard to the "emigration" has become critical in a number of places:
>
> - The command of the Party's Provincial Committees has been loose.

[402] Ibid, 278.

- The repression of reactionaries has been too weak.
- A number of cadres, because they are afraid of violating the Geneva Accords, have opened the door wide for people to leave.

Localities need to fix the above weaknesses immediately.[403]

As was often the case when the VWP leaders were planning on carrying out some sort of repressive measure, they tried to make that measure seem as though it had been demanded of them by the masses. Thus it was crucial to create the appearance of popular anger over the emigration, as though people in village X, many of whom were probably struggling with lack of food, had the time and inclination to care about whether members of village Y decided to emigrate or not. Nevertheless, the appearance of a "mass movement" against the emigration had to be created, perhaps as cover for the military units and the thousands of cadres that had already been sent in to areas where large-scale emigration continued to pose a threat. As the May 1, 1955 Central Committee telegram instructed:

1. We must immediately create a mass movement of struggle against the enemy's efforts to force people to emigrate:

- Make the masses believe in the power of hatred of the enemy, struggle zealously, and repress reactionaries.
- Organize meetings and demonstrations in hamlets and communes, make petitions, shout slogans against the forced emigration, call on the loudspeaker, etc. Make it become an interconnected movement between this place and that place. Organizations and sectors must raise their voice against the enemy.
- During the meetings, there should a person who was forced by the enemy to request permission to go to the South. He should condemn the enemy and then request to withdraw his application for emigration. He should return his passport… There should be reports in localities of the damage caused by the enemy's efforts to force people to emigrate.

Staging the public demonstrations was the first of three tasks assigned to cadres by the Central Committee. The second task was titled "Resolutely repress reactionaries," and was clearly meant to appear to be a response to spontaneous public outcry.

- The Public Security organs are responsible and they must fulfrill their duties with this work.
- Gather the reactionaries together for education, organize meetings of priests in order to limit their activities and educate them. Provincial-level party leaders must take responsibility for these study classes and these meetings.
- Those priests who are propagandizing for people to go to the South or who, on their own initiative, organize large services (3-4 parishes), will be called before the administration [chính quyền]. They must be told that they may not just organize large services whenever they want to. These priests need to inform the government so as to guarantee the maintenance of law and order and the people's production plan (this should be told to them by word of mouth). [Those provincial-level party

[403] "Điện của Trung ương, 1/5/1955" [Central Committee Telegram, 1/5/1955], *VKDTT 1955*, 282.

> members who meet with priests] should point out their scheme of frequently holding large services to force the people to emigrate. Priests should be told unequivocally that they may not exploit church services to propagandize for the purpose of forcing people to emigrate, for concentrating people together to go to the South.
> - Find an exemplary case [of a priest violating these rules], bring him out for trial and announce the verdict widely.[404]

Meanwhile, the food crisis continued to haunt the regime. "The hunger situation has eased a little in some places, *but in many places the situation remains critical, with some places worsening.*" As they had ever since taking power in August 1945, the Party leaders stressed the need to solve hunger through the increasing of production rather than the distribution of food aid. They wanted cadres to "lead production," which apparently meant exhorting the peasants out to their fields to tend to their crops. "There are places such as Nông Cống (Thanh Hóa) where a field 7km long has dried out, the rice crop in a bad state, and it is only 5 meters away from a river. And yet cadres do not mobilize the people to irrigate the field to fight the drought." The Party leaders did much complaining about the failure of cadres to "lead production," but there was no discussion of why peasants seemed so unmotivated to farm. Why was it necessary for cadres to order peasants to carry out normal farming tasks that had been a part of rural life for centuries? The solution to the problem of production (as with virtually everything else in the DRV) was always more Party control, more Party involvement in production, more centralization of power, more reporting, etc. As the May 5 directive stated, the Central Committee had "reminded" cadres that they need to "directly lead the peasants to plant vegetables to overcome the famine." Then, as was typically the case, the directive called for an intensification of reports and communication between different levels of the apparatus: "… Zone Party leaders need to send a directive to all levels and to cadres involved in anti-famine work to *pay more attention to the problem of production, make it a matter of discipline, a responsibility, and the content of anti-famine reports must include information on production.*"[405]

For places where food aid was needed immediately, the Party leaders were upset that more efforts were not being made to squeeze extra rice out of local "landlords."

> On the issue of famine relief, places are still paying too little attention to *the issue of compulsory lending* [trưng vay] and when they do put forward the issue of compulsory lending or mutual aid, they do not propose it in the actual district or commune that is suffering from famine, proposing it instead in different districts or communes. This shows that among the different Party levels and among cadres there is the thinking that, in localities suffering from hunger, the landlords and the people no longer have the ability to lend food [hết khả năng]. Putting forward the issue of compulsory lending in different places has a few disadantages. In places not suffering from hunger, the people do not zealously participate in the work of compulsory lending. Similarly, carrying out compulsory lending in these places is likely to make the situation more complicated and create more difficulties for us with respect to transporting [the rice]. *The idea that landlords have lost the ability [to supply rice] must be opposed.* Inter-zone and zone Party leaders must take charge over places that are suffering heavily from

[404] Ibid, 283.
[405] Nguyễn Duy Trinh, "Thông tri của Ban Bí thư số 31-TT/TW, 5/5/1955: Gửi các Liên khu ủy, Khu ủy" [Secretariat Communique no. 31, 5/5/1955: To Interzone and Zone Party Leaders], *VKDTT 1955*, 286.

> famine, must put forward *the issue of compulsory lending, first and foremost in the actual communes and districts that have famine.*[406]

As we have seen, it was always difficult for the Party leaders to explain why the DRV peasant tended to be so unenthusiastic about farming, and, indeed, they rarely described the problem in such terms. But some of their solutions to the problem of famine and production suggest that the VWP leaders were frustrated and angry about a perceived lack of effort in the fields. They seem to have hoped to intimidate peasants into working harder by creating in their minds the possibility that lackluster effort in the fields could be construed by the regime as a form of economic sabotage, perhaps even a sign that a person was somehow in the employ of the enemy. "As for those who sabotage production, sow fear among the people, we need to rely on the masses and find [tìm cho ra] and severely punish the ringleaders, the instigators, in order to *protect the interest of the people and limit the activity of the saboteurs*."[407] Once again, repressive activity that was probably intended to jolt the entire countryside into action had to be framed in terms of responding to the desire of the people or protecting their interests in some way.

Conclusion

In the beginning of the chapter, I posed the question of whether the common image of the DRV regime as followers of the Geneva Accords corresponded to what actually happened on the ground. Evidence taken primarily from the 2001 *Party Documents* series (i.e. carefully selected and edited by the authorities in Hà Nội today) shows overwhelmingly, in my opinion, that the VWP leaders remained determined as ever to carry out their land reform and to punish both real and imagined enemies of the regime. This was certainly a violation of article 14c (no reprisals) of the Geneva Accords. According to the account of Mieczyslaw Maneli, a Polish member of the ICC who had close dealings with the DRV side, the issue of how "democratic liberties" would be defined by the ICC was a concern among the DRV leaders. To avoid argument over "bourgeois" versus "socialist" interpretations of democratic freedoms, Maneli had proposed that the ICC adhere to the American and French bills of rights and the United Nations' "Declaration of Human Rights" composed in 1949. As Maneli recounted fifteen years later:

> Naturally, I had no difficulties in getting the Indian and Canadian delegations to adopt this interpretation. But there were prolonged discussions with our North Vietnamese allies, because they were afraid that some time later it could be turned against them. During the confidential talks I had with representatives of the North Vietnamese liaison mission, the Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Defense, and Foreign Office, I argued in the following way: All the future reforms in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam will be achieved in a legal way. All individual and personal rights and liberties will be preserved. Due process of law has been established and will be observed. Therefore, there is no reason to fear that the Indian or Canadian delegation could make any accusations against the Democratic Republic. The only accusation could be that private property has been restricted or in some cases abolished. But this is an internal affair of every state, and one can always argue that even in the so-called

[406] Ibid, 286-287.
[407] Ibid.

> capitalist states there are various restrictions on private property, that nationalization and expropriation have been taking place in Western European countries for many years.
>
> The North Vietnamese representatives were not impressed with my arguments, but they had no counterarguments of their own. We of the Polish delegation were aware of what their objections were. We realized that some of their "revolutionary methods" were not in accordance with due process of law. Therefore, they were afraid that such an interpretation of the Geneva Accords might be used for "counter-revolutionary" purposes.[408]

As we saw in chapter 5, the land reform was in clear violation of the United Nation's "Declaration of Human Rights" because it punished people retroactively for engaging in activities that had been declared legal by the DRV's own laws at the time. The DRV representatives dealing with the ICC had good reason to be concerned about how "democratic freedoms" were defined.

Maneli's account of his experience working for the ICC and his meetings with the North Vietnamese, who hoped that he, as a member of the Communist bloc, would be an advocate for their cause, sheds light on how the DRV leaders were able to emerge, in the eyes of many, as the adherents of the accords. As a dissident intellectual who eventually left Poland for the West, Maneli's account of his experiences with the North Vietnamese, Chinese, and Soviets in their dealings with Indochina is a highly critical and cynical one. He describes, for example, the bizarre obsession of Võ Nguyên Giáp and other DRV military brass with bringing tanks from China across the border into North Vietnam to begin training. As the Geneva Accords prohibited the introduction of new weapons into North or South Vietnam, there was some risk of being caught by the ICC. According to Maneli, the Soviets thought this was a silly risk to take considering the fact that, in their minds at least, it made no real difference whether the tanks were in the DRV or a few miles across the border in China. The training would be just the same. Maneli also recounts how the North Vietnamese asked the Soviets to use their influence with the Indians on the ICC to "make them less eager to push the question of the freedom of movement." According to Maneli, the Soviets "promised little and did even less." Indeed, the Soviets apparently told Maneli and the Polish delegation that they should cooperate with the Canadians and Indians to solve the problem of the emigration.

Maneli then describes how (he saw) the DRV leadership respond to the issue of emigration:

> Under pressure, the Hanoi government decided to issue instructions that applicants be allowed to move to the South. But the government found in a short time that its recommendations were not carried out, were sabotaged, by local authorities. The central government in Hanoi realized that all this could create an extremely dangerous situation for their international prestige and for the future general elections in 1956, as provided for by the Geneva Accords. The Northern government and Ho Chi Minh personally tried to crush the resistance of the provincial authorities. They sent many high officials, including ministers and members of the Central Committee, to explain the situation and the international obligations. This did not work either. Therefore, at the beginning of 1955, they decided to organize a special mission which was supposed to hold conferences with all provincial and sometimes also district authorities in areas where the Catholic population lived and caused trouble for the authorities. I took part in it, not in my capacity as the legal and political adviser of the Polish delegation, but

[408] Mieczyslaw Maneli, *The War of the Vanquished* (New York: Harper Row, 1971), 33-34 (note).

> as a representative of the friendly Polish Workers' party and a specialist on the questions of international law and foreign policy arising out of the Geneva Accords.[409]

Without getting into the details of Maneli's experience on this "special mission," we can already see that his assessment of the situation is the opposite of the picture of the regime's response to emigration that emerges from the internal Party documents. As this chapter has shown, it was the Party leaders themselves who were pushing hard to get passive local Party members to do more to prevent people from leaving. Thus it appears from Maneli's account that the VWP leaders carefully fed him and other ICC members a narrative of top-Party moderation and flexibility in contrast to lower-Party radicalism and intransigence. For all his perceptive observations and thoughtful insights into the dynamics at play in Vietnam, Maneli seems to have been fooled completely by the DRV leaders on this issue. The meeting seems to have been a choreographed stunt during which provincial leaders were to play the role of local hardliners in order to position the Party leaders as earnest adherents of the accords.

Maneli's account was subsequently used by Edwin Moise in his 1982 book on the land reform. Indeed, Maneli's take on the emigration probably seemed to Moise to cohere nicely with his own overall explanation for the violence of the land reform, which stressed the same narrative of top-Party moderation undermined by low-Party radicalism. Moise wrote:

> Maneli…describes conferences in which he participated, at which top leaders of the DRV tried to persuade local officials to stop obstructing the migration. It is not likely that Maneli is portraying the DRV leaders as more reasonable than they actually were. Having defected from Poland to the West about three years before writing this, Maneli would, if anything, have been biased against Communist officials trying to hold in unwilling populations. [410]

On May 16, 1955, the ordeal of the emigration was finally over for the VWP leaders, with DRV forces taking control over Hải Phòng. That day, the DRV deputy minister of defense, Tạ Quang Bửu, who had played a key role in the negotiations at Geneva and who had ultimately signed the accords, delivered a speech and held a press conference about the end of the period of the 300 days. He spoke of the "blatant" and "systematic" violations of the accords committed by the "Americans and their [Vietnamese] running dogs." This was true—the Americans and the Diệm regime had violated the Geneva accords in fundamental ways, bringing weapons into the South (the U.S.) and repressing suspected members of the DRV forces in the South (Diệm). Tạ Quang Bửu summarized the actions of the DRV's opponents in the South as follows:

> On the one hand, they commit serious violations of the people's right to freedom of movement; on the other hand, they make efforts to distort the truth and slander our Government, accusing it of having prevented people from emigrating. They do this as a means of covering up their own violations and fooling world opinion, which will then serve as a basis for carrying out even more blatant violations of the ceasefire agreement.[411]

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[409] Ibid, 41.

[410] Moise, *Land Reform*, 195 (note). Maneli's narrative of local intransigence and top-Party cooperation seems also to have influenced Ramesh Thakur's account of the ICC. See *Peacekeeping in Vietnam: Canada, India, Poland, and the International Commission* (Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 1984), 137.

[411] Tạ Quang Bửu, "Một giai đoạn quan trọng trong việc thi hành hiệp định Giơ-ne-vơ đã kết thúc" [An Important Stage in the Implementation of the Geneva Accords has been Completed], *Nhân dân* [The People], no. 441, May 18, 1955.

According to that issue of *The People*, Tạ Quang Bửu had been asked by a "foreign journalist" about whether the 300-day period of free travel might be extended. The article summarized the deputy defense-minister's response as follows:

> [That] issue has no legal basis at all. The Geneva Accords state clearly that the freedom to choose where one lives, according to article 14d, will be implemented for a period of 300 days. Article six of the conference's Final Declaration also states clearly that the temporary military demarcation line absolutely cannot be called either a political or territorial border. In Vietnam, the Vietnamese people have right to move freely, to live where they want [cư trú], to make a living, not only during the 300 days but forever afterward. In accordance with the spirit of the Geneva Accords and the ardent desire of the people, the [DRV] Government not only made an effort to implement correctly article 14d but has also put forward the question of re-establishing normal relations between the North and South as a means of guaranteeing that all Vietnamese have the freedom of movement in their own country.[412]

I have not been able to find a Western account of the Tạ Quang Bửu press conference. But one can imagine a Western or South Vietnamese journalist asking him for clarification on at least one obvious question raised by the official DRV position on the emigration: If accusations that you have prevented people from emigrating are "slander," why not extend the period of free movement indefinitely? If you have not prevented people from leaving, then everybody who wanted to emigrate must have done so, and it should not matter to you whether the border remains open because nobody would leave. Extending the period of "free movement" would be the simplest way of exposing as "slander" those accusations against you—why not do it?

During the Vienna Conference held from May 1-13, 1955, the British had apparently asked the Soviet delegation (Britain and the USSR were the co-chairs of the Geneva Conference) to request that the DRV extend the period of "free movement" until the ICC unanimously agreed that there were no more Northerners wishing to leave.[413] It was believed in the West that as many as 50,000 people were still waiting in Hải Phòng for permission to leave when the deadline arrived.[414] Nguyễn Tất Thành quietly agreed to this request, and, according to Moise, allowed over the next two months an additional 4,797 additional people to leave.[415] However, not a word of this extension of the period of "free movement" appeared in the DRV press, so it is unclear how people outside of Hải Phòng who did not have access to the ICC would have found out about this extension. Moreover, the regime had already begun to carry out public trials of people for the "crime" of "forcing and enticing" people to emigrate to the South.[416] And unlike news of

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[412] V.N.T.T.X., "Hội nghị báo chí của Bộ Tổng tư lệnh Quân đội nhân dân Việt-nam" [Press Conference Held by the High Command of the Vietnamese People's Army], *Nhân dân*, no. 441, May 18, 1955.
[413] "Refugee Date May be Extended," *The Washington Post*, May 20, 1955.
[414] "Refugee Deadline Extended," *The New York Times*, May 21, 1955.
[415] Moise, *Land Reform*, 195.
[416] "Chính quyền ta kiên quyết trừng trị bọn phản động cưỡng ép di cư" [Our Government Resolutely Punishes the Reactionaries who Force People to Emigrate], *Nhân dân* [The People], no. 446, May 23, 1955. This account discussed the public trials of Catholic leaders in the Thanh Hóa coastal village of Ba Làng who had apparently tried to flag down a French ship so that it pick up a large group of people who had been "forced" to emigrate to the South. In the first trial, a Catholic leader named Nguyễn Hữu Thới received eight years in prison. During the second trial, three other Catholic leaders received between eight and twelve year prison sentences. Always concerned about the public perception of such episodes, the writer of the article concluded with the following sentence: "In both places,

the extension of the period of free movement, these trials were published by the regime in the DRV press. This approach by the Party leaders was not likely to create an atmosphere that made people think emigration (if they had actually heard about the extension through outside or unofficial channels) was still a viable option.

With the French gone, the threat of the emigration over, and the doors out of North Vietnam officially shut, the VWP leaders would quickly make efforts to raise the land reform's profile again. With a little over a year left before the regime's self-imposed deadline of June 1956, the VWP had only carried out land reform in 828 of the total 3,314 communes slated for the campaign. In terms of population, this amounted to a little less than two million of North Vietnam's roughly ten million rural inhabitants. In the next chapter, we will look at that final year of the campaign from the summer of 1955 to the summer of 1956, when the vast majority of the DRV population experienced the land reform.

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after the court delivered its verdict, tens of thousands of compatriots in attendance expressed their enthusiastic support."

Chapter 6

The Final Year of the Land Reform: Summer 1955 – Summer 1956 (waves 4 and 5)

Between the end of the period of the 300 days in late May 1955 and the 7th Plenum of the VWP 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," the leader of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Thành's first visit to Moscow as a Vietnamese political leader, which took place in January and February 1950, had coincided with the signing of the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assisance. According to the historian Benoit de Treglode, while attending the banquet held to celebrate that treaty, Thành had asked Stalin why a similar one could not be signed with the DRV. The Soviet leader had apparently replied that such a move would obviously compromise the secret nature of Thành's visit to Moscow.[417] In his memoirs, Khrushchev provides an account of this exchange between Thành and Stalin, though mentions nothing about the DRV leader's question about an official treaty. As Khrushchev recounted:

> I remember another troubling incident [from Hồ Chí Minh's February 1950 visit to Moscow]. Ho very much wanted his visit to Moscow to be announced publicly. He spoke to Stalin about this. I wasn't present on that occasion; I only heard about it from Stalin afterward. Stalin told us that Ho wanted to be received officially as a representative of Vietnam. "But I told him that the right moment had been missed. You're already in Moscow. You came her unannounced, so how can we announce you know.
>
> To this Ho replied: "Let's do it this way. Give me a plane, I'll go up in the air, the appropriate preparations will be announced, and when I land a welcoming ceremony will be organized corresponding to my rank as chief of state."
>
> Stalin laughed and made fun of him. "Imagine what he wanted. He wanted that! Ha, ha![418]

Five and half years later, in July 1955, a little more than two years after Stalin's death, Thành would make his first public visit to the Soviet capital.

This time, the Soviet leadership would roll out the red carpet for him, with every single member of the CPSU Central Committee's Presidium awaiting "Comrade Din's" arrival on the tarmac of the Moscow airport. The DRV leader would also be given meetings with many of the most powerful leaders of the Soviet Union. 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 his negotiations with the Soviet leaders, Thành was able to secure for his government 400 million rubles in economic aid, promises that Soviet technical advisers would be sent to Vietnam, and an invitation for DRV students to receive training at Soviet universities. But as Gaiduk points out, this was "nothing

[417] As cited in Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam*, 6.
[418] Khrushchev, *Memoirs: Volume 3*, 499.

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.[419]

During the leadup to 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 to meet with Soviet military leaders. This suggestion was 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."[420]

Thus Nguyễn Tất Thành did not include Giáp in the delegation, but he did bring Trường Chinh, the VWP general secretary. It is interesting to note that this appears to have been Chinh's first time outside of northern Vietnam in his entire life, with the exception of the quick trip he took to meet with Thành just across the Chinese border back in 1941. Chinh never made the trip to southern China, Hong Kong, or Thailand back in the late 1920s, not to mention, of course, France or the Soviet Union. Within Vietnam, it appears that he had never visited Saigon. Even the French colonial prison system, which played a key role in moving Communist revolutionaries around the country, seems to have conspired to keep Chinh rooted in the North. He spent his six years of imprisonment primarily in the Hà Nội Central Prison and in the Sơn La province prison in the northwestern part of the country. The difference in worldliness between Chinh and Thành was enormous. This is not to downplay Trường Chinh's considerable ability and courage, but rather to provide a measure of perspective on the relationship between these two VWP leaders. I believe that there was tremendous mutual respect, loyalty, and friendship between them after fourteen years together, but I do not think that they traveled to Beijing and Moscow as equals in their own eyes or in the eyes of other top Party leaders. This reality, in my opinion, is important to bear in mind as we consider how Trường Chinh would end up losing his position as VWP general secretary at the end of the land reform.

During their month of travel together, Thành and Chinh would have had ample time to discuss privately with each other the situation back home in the DRV. As we saw, the Party leaders were increasingly frustrated with how the land reform was proceeding, feeling that "rightist deviations" had become all too common in a campaign that was losing its sting in the postwar chaos of the Geneva Accords.

Efforts by the Party Leaders to Reinvigorate the Land Reform

Looking back over the past few months, Nguyễn Tất Thành and Trường Chinh could count a few measures taken by them to ensure that those serving in the land reform apparatus, currently 21,679 cadres, would make the campaign achieve the unspecified "required goals" of the campaign. The first such move appears to have been the February 1955 expansion of the Party "reorganization" up the rungs of power from the commune to the district level. Such an upward expansion of the purge would dramatically raise the stakes for district level Party members who were considering whether to 'stick their necks out' to save commune level members targeted in the land reform.

[419] Gaiduk, 65-67.
[420] Ibid, 63.

Second, at the 7th Plenum in March, the Party leaders had apparently held discussions with Central Committee members who were concerned about "leftist deviations" during the land reform. As we saw, 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, the top Party leaders had insisted that rightist deviations were the greater danger, and seem to have fallen back on Leninist party discipline to some extent to enforce their view of the situation.[421]

Third, in early June, the VWP Secretariat released a resolution dealing with "Organization Work." It called for the Party purge (or "reorganization") to be expanded upward yet again. Now provincial level Party organizations were to be targeted for purging as well. 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. As such, 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.[422]

This announcement surely gave provincial Party leaders pause for thought as they considered how they would handle the land reform in their province. Five months later in November, as the land reform was heading into its final wave, when more than half of the DRV would undergo the campaign, the Central Committee would release a clarification on how the provincial level Party reorganization should be carried out. "Hold a reorganization meeting: because there are a lot of provincial level cadres, one reorganization meeting will not be enough to cover all of them. As such, [the reorganization] should be divided into a few different waves, with the most important cadres going first and the secondary cadres afterward. But the time for the entire reorganization should not carry on too long.[423]

Fourth (also put forward in that June 3 resolution of the Secretariat), was a push to tie Party promotions and discipline 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 antifeudal front, we have a very large force of cadres participating. That provides an extremely convenient occasion to promote and discipline [xử trí] cadres in order to reorganize the ranks of our cadres. During the land reform, discipline and promotion can be carried not only with a number of cadres participating in the mass mobilization but can be carried out to a certain extent with cadres who have not yet participated in the campaign. With respect to these cadres, discipline and promotion can be

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[421] 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, 3/6/1955: Organizational Work During 1955], *VKDTT 1955*, 314.
[422] Ibid, 326.
[423] "Chỉ thị của Trung ương số 45-CT/TW, 9/11/1955: Về việc chỉnh đốn các cơ quan chỉ đạo cấp tỉnh trong cải cách ruộng đất" [Central Committee Directive no. 45, 9/11/1955: Reorganizing Provincial Commanding Offices during the Land Reform], *VKDTT 1955*, 697-698.

> carried out based on both their attitude toward the mass mobilization and on the materials discovered [about them] by the masses.[424]

Thus a bureaucrat could theoretically be subjected to discipline simply for not having the correct attitude toward the land reform even if he or she had not yet served the campaign. Presumably, trying to avoid being a land reform cadre or being less than excited about the prospect of leading the overthrow of the landlord class would have fallen under the category of having a bad attitude. Indeed, as the resolution stated, "any cadres who, despite being educated about the land reform, continue to refuse serving as cadres, should be punished appropriately." Similarly, the resolution 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 displined during the land reform should not return to his job and be kept in the same position or even promoted. [425]

A Third Phase is added to the Mass Mobilization: "Reinspection"

Nguyễn Tất Thành and Trường Chinh returned from their trip overseas on July 23, 1955, with about three weeks to prepare for the coming 8th Plenum of the Central Committee 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. To gain more leverage over the land reform apparatus, they and the other top Party leaders added a third phase to the land reform, which was called "reinspection" [phúc tra]. As Trường Chinh explained in his report to the 8th Plenum of the Central Committee in August:

> 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 [trong sạch], 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 [cải tiến] their leadership in places that have carried out land reform. They are still heavy on formalistic meetings and have not yet fully grasped the situation and 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 with no more problems, or, seeing difficulties, they become pessimistic, thinking that the land reform has "gone nowhere" [không đi đến đâu].
>
> 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 weakpoints and mistakes, and organize peasants to engage in production correctly according to the Party's principles and guidelines.[426]

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[424] Lê Văn Lương, "Organizational Work during 1955," 324.
[425] Ibid, 332-333.
[426] 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

The reinspection wave was surely based on Chinese Communist models and had likely been planned from the beginning. Nevertheless, the concept of reinspection was vague enough such that it could have been infused with a number of different meanings. First, it could be done discreetly or even secretly, with no effort made to use the results of the reinspection to influence how the campaign was then being conducted. Second, the results of the reinspection could be widely publicized to have a moderating impact on the campaign, stating, for example, that the attack on the landlord class had been too aggressive. A third option—the one taken by the Party leaders—was to propagandize the results of the reinspection as a lever for pressuring the land reform apparatus into finding more targets for repression.

The reinspection, like the rent reduction and land reform phases of the mass mobilization, would have followed the typical pattern of an intitial experimental wave carried out in a few communes followed by an important summing-up meeting to affirm the goals of this phase for others to follow. There was also a special directive on the reinspection released by the Central Committee, 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 published in 2001. Yet the document on the reinspection from the Vietnamese North Interzone claims to be "based" on it, enabling us to infer its basic points to some extent.

As noted above, the reinspection of places that had already carried out land reform would naturally send a signal to land reform brigade leaders currently carrying out the campaign's fifth and final wave. If the reinspection had found "excesses" and "leftist deviations," most of the brigade leaders would have taken that as a sign to ease off somewhat on their attack on the landlord class. A description of the reinspection in the Party's theoretical journal, *Study* [Học tập], shows that the meaning the VWP leaders attributed to the reinspection was just the opposite:

> The experimental wave of the land reform reinspection in five communes of Phú Thọ provice has concluded. The results show that the land reform, generally speaking, has been carried out well and represents a basic revolutionary victory in the countryside. However, there are still a number of weaknesses such as letting landlords slip through the net [để lọt], including some cruel and despotic landlords who are both ringleaders of sabotage efforts. And there are still some fruits [of struggle] that have not yet been redistributed permanently or have not been redistributed appropriately… [Those weaknesses] are the result a number of cadres having not grasped the policy and not making the effort to go deeply and closely [into their community] while carrying out the mass mobilization work. Through the reinspection, those weaknesses were fixed, 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.[427]

The report of the Vietnamese North Interzone Land Reform Committee, which was sent to the Party's Central Land Reform Committee as well as the Vietnamese North Interzone leadership, suggests that the reinspection was not likely to have had a moderating effect on the campaign:

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for the Implementation of Vietnamese Unification on the Basis of Independence and Democracy], *VKDTT 1955*, 511-512.

[427] "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* [Study], no. 2, January 1, 1956, 73.

The Land Reform Committee 4/3/1956
Of the Vietnamese North Interzone
No. 14 Report

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 communes such as those lying: next to key roads, around provincial towns, in places that have leading [Party and government] offices [cơ quan dầu não], and in places where there are important state-owned enterprises. At the same time, [the reinspection] needs to clean up [làm gọn] districts in order to make it more convenient for the district Party leaders to lead, to focus on the task of reinspecting the land reform when it is done in their district. After discussing with provincial leaders, we have come to the following resolutions:

[… (This section details the districts and communes to be reinspected in the second wave of reinspection for the four provinces of the Vietnamese North Interzone)]

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 spirt of the Central Committee's directive as mentioned above, the interzone leadership made preparations and delegated to comrade Nguyễn Tân 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 the provincial leaders to prepare reinspection for the above-mentioned communes and to [discuss] the special characteristics of these places:

1. Bắc Giang: We will carry out reinspection in those communes around the provincial town of Phủ Lạng Thượng [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 roots such as highway 1, the railroad, a large bridge, a port, etc. It is a place densely populated with people. [Moreover], [t]here during the third wave of the land reform, the enemy carried out serious acts of sabotage such as the murder of six

> people in Hung Tien, three murders in Thọ Xương, while Sông Mai, Tân Mỹ, and Chi minh have all also had serious incidents of sabotage such as killing people and burning houses. This region was the one where the enemy operated most strongly for the entire land reform brigade of wave three of the land reform. But we struggled against the enemy's efforts at sabotage very weakly. There was not a single commune 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 communes were efforts to sabotage tax collection [phá thuế], 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 (1 time was by a pile of bamboo planks about to be used by the army for the construction of a house, 1 time by the door of the Agricultural department, and one time a moctirv [bomb] was set just before the arrival of a French peace convoy to visit us—it was defused afterward.) Also in this commune, after the land reform, there are 11 youths who meet on their own initiative [tự họp] engage in debauchery [chơi bời] and go [text unreadable] with each other. [F]our months ago in Tân Mỹ there was a murder that has not yet been solved [chưa tìm ra], 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. [428]

The descriptions of the situation in the areas of the other three provinces scheduled for reinspection were similar in their stress on what the land reform had achieved from a security perspective rather than what had been achieved agriculturally. The plan for Thái Nguyên province appears at first to be an exception, but upon further consideration, is perhaps still in line with the general focus on security rather than agriculture. That plan stated that the first places to undergo reinspection were the ten communes of the province where the rent reduction and land reform had first been tested (Đại Từ, where Nguyễn Thị Năm's estate was located). Those ten communes needed to be reinspected immediately because they were pegged to be turned into the DRV's first experimental collectivized farms. As such, it seems unlikely that the reinspection there would have been motivated by a desire to determine the extent to which the land-to-the-tiller aspect of the land reform had achieved the promised boost in production. It is more likely, in my opinion, that the reinspection there was aimed at reducing the likelihood of resistance to the coming collectivization of agriculture.

Making the Land Reform Brigade Leaders Carry out Self-Criticism

Another measure that the Party leaders took to prevent the campaign from running out of steam was to discipline the land reform brigade leaders following the fourth wave of the campaign carried out roughly during the latter half of 1955 (i.e. immediately in the wake of the 300 day period). A January 27, 1956 directive written by Nguyễn Duy Trinh on behalf of the Party Secretariat states 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 [kiểm thảo] because they saw

[428] TTLT3, UBCCRD Liên khu Việt Bắc, file 1157.

that they were still disregarding [xem nhẹ] the work of reorganizing Party branches. That is a major weakness that needs to be addressed."[429] According to the directive, "brigade leaders and cadres had not probed deeply in order to grasp firmly the [local Party] branchs' special situation, and they have not fully recognized the wicked and sophisticated schemes of the landlord class and their reactionary political organizations that dominate Party branches."[430]

The Politburo's Picture of the Countryside

The crucial backdrop to all these moves to reinvigorate the land reform campaign was the Party leadership's public and internal insistence on a view of the rural situation in Vietnam as full of evil landlords, saboteurs, spies, Nationalist Party members, traitors, and landlord sympathizers, all working more or less in concert toward the collective goal of destroying the revolution. The examples of this narrative in both internal and public documents are far too numerous to be covered with any thoroughness, so a few typical examples will have to suffice. With respect to the public discourse, the Party's main vehicles for the promotion of this view of the countryside and the notion of rightist deviations by the land reform apparatus were *The People* and the newly established (December 1955) theoretical journal *Study*. The regime's other two main newspapers, *Literature and Arts* and *People's Army*, appear to have been used to shape public perceptions of the landlord class and the land reform campaign more generally. But they seem not to have been used to influence directly the implementation of the land reform by the land reform apparatus in the way that *The People* and *Study* were.

Starting with *The People*, during the month of June 1955, a string of articles appear exhorting land reform cadres to attack the landlord class with more resolve. The titles of the articles in most cases convey well enough their basic tone. The June 11 issue of the paper 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."[431] Two days later the newspaper published a pair of articles. The first was "Raise Vigilance and Destroy the Landlord Class's Scheme of Sabotage," and the second, "Carrying out Self-Criticism for Rightist Thinking.[432] 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"),[433] August ("After Undergoing Rectification for Step 2, Cadres Have Begun to Fix their Rightist Thinking, Work

[429] Nguyễn Duy Trinh, "Chỉ thị của Ban Bí thư, số 06/CT-TW, 27/1/1956: 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, 21/1/1956: Strengthening Leadership in the Work of Reorganizing and Constructing Rural Party Branches during Wave 5 of the Land Reform], *VKDTT 1956*, 33-34.
[430] Ibid, 28.
[431] 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* [The People], no. 465, June 11, 1955.
[432] V.H., "Nâng cao cảnh giác, đập tan âm mưu phá hoại của giai cấp địa chủ" [Raise Vigiliance 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* [The People], no. 468, June 14, 1955.
[433] 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* [The People], no. 513, July 29, 1955.

has Improved"),[434] September ("Recognize Clearly the Landlords' Schemes and Promptly Repress Their Acts of Sabotage"),[435] October ("The Rent Reduction Team of Chiến Thắng Commune (Lạng Sơn) Probed Deeply and Found a Cruel Despotic Landlord Ringleader, and Discovered a Commando Organization"),[436] November ("Working Against Enemy Sabotage of the Land Reform in Bắc Ninh—Bắc Giang"),[437] etc. Similar ideas about the alleged reaction of the landlord class appear in dozens of other articles about the land reform that have less obvious titles.

The Party's theoretical journal, *Study*, which, as mentioned above, began in December, delivered much the same fare as *The People*. In that opening issue was an article by Hồ Viết Thắng, the vice-minister of agriculture and one of the most important members of the Central Land Reform Committee. His article 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 [cầu kết] with the Americans and their lackeys, is trying hard to sabotage the land reform and, generally speaking, sabotage us in all facets. They rule out no evil scheme in order to achieve their barbaric and dark goal.[438]

Another shorter article in that first issue of *Study* was titled "Raise Revolutionary Vigilance." It conveyed a similar picture of landlord ruses and cadre reluctance:

> During the 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 create murders, which one cadre quickly blamed on the person who died for being "afraid of having their class raised, afraid of being targeted for struggle, and therefore committed suicide." The enemy organizes the throwing of dirt and rocks, the burning of houses, and the clipping of telephone wires, and a number of comrades do not investigate, or they only investigate superficially. They conlude that "the house burned by accident," or "the wires were cut by mischievous young kids." These cadres fell prey to the arguments put forward by the enemy to throw them off track. Even more

[434] 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* [The People], no. 521, August 6, 1955.
[435] 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* [The People], no. 563, September 20, 1955.
[436] News from the Central Land Reform Committee, "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" [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* [The People], no. 580, October 4, 1955.
[437] 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* [The People], no. 632, November 25, 1955.
[438] 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.

> 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, in a number of localities, for a long period of time, the enemy was not attacked, the masses were not mobilized, and the work of land reform was delayed.[439]

The January issue of *Study* had an article that essentially repeated the same message about the progress of the land reform's fifth and final wave, which had just begun. "The landlord class, especially the cruel despotic ones, the saboteurs, and the spies, are even more furiously, madly, and perfidiously resisting [the land reform]. A number of cadres, having not recognized this situation in a timely manner, have committed serious rightist deviations."[440] In February, the Party's theoretical journal published an article on the land reform tiled "The Enemy Must be Resolutely and Promptly Attacked in Order to Push Forward Wave 5 of the Land Reform."[441]

As is well known, the CPSU 20th Congress, when Khrushchev delivered his "secret speech" denouncing Stalin's crimes, was held at the end of February. Like other Communist Parties around the world, the VWP leaders appear to have been thrown into a state of confusion as to how the 20th Congress should be handled. The March issue of *Study* simply published translations of some of the key speeches delivered at the Congress, but of course not the actual "secret speech." The Party leaders seem to have dropped these speeches into *Study*, providing relatively little guidance to readers about how they were to be assessed. Though there were no direction mentions of Stalin, it would not have been difficult for a Party member to have connected the dots and recognized that views of the recently passed leader had changed. The April issue of *Study* also did not have any articles about the land reform, which was still in the middle of its enormous final wave.

Finally, in the May issue, *Study* returned to the land reform after a two-month break. The article was titled, "A Few Things that Need Attention in the Task of Reorganizing Rural Party Branches." The article, which was the only one in the entire issue that had no author attributed to it, was on page 113 of the journal and covered about three and half pages. It began by describing the difficulties of the fifth and final wave, the fact that many places had gone straight to land reform rather than passing through rent reduction first, and, of course, the "insane and wicked efforts at sabotage" carried out by the enemy. In measured tones, the article noted some of the successes of land reform cadres in "kicking bad elements out of the Party" and admitting into it new recruits who had the "highest consciousness" [giác ngộ nhất]. After getting the 'faint praise' out of the way, the *Study* article continued: "However, next to those strengths mentioned above, many land reform teams committed a number of serious mistakes. These mistakes need to be analyzed clearly in order to immediately fix them during this wave, in order to make the work of Party branch reorganization during wave 5 achieve a good result."[442] Now, in the light of the

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[439] Quyết tiến, "Nâng cao cảnh giác cách mạng" [Raise Revolutionary Vigilance], *Học tập* [Study], no. 1, December 1955, 51.
[440] "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* [Study], no. 3, February, 1956, 73.
[441] "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* [Study], no. 4, March 1956, 57.
[442] "Mấy điểm cần chú ý trong việc chấn chỉnh chi bộ nông thôn" [A Few Things that Need Attention in the Reorganization of Party Branches in the Countryside], *Học tập* [Study], no. 6, May, 1956, 118.

CPSU 20th Congress, it was apparently imperative that land reform cadres, so recently and relentlessly chastised by the Party leadership for rightist deviations, were now going to be accused of having committed "leftist deviations."

Internal Discourse

The internal discourse on the situation in the countryside (that has passed the Party censors) tells a similar story, though with a few more concrete details. In the following passage from a circular released by the Party Secretariat in July 1955, we can see how the VWP leaders attempted to harness the power of science and numbers to buttress an arbitrarily constructed view of the countryside founded primarily on false confessions:

> The directive on Party reorganization during the rent reduction in recently liberated areas number 24-CT/TW from 10/6/1955 stated clearly: the Party branches in the countryside in areas recently liberated, since the time of their founding to the time when rent reduction was carried out, have not only been dominated [lũng đoạn] by the exploitative class but also have been attacked by the reactionary imperialists. As such, they are seriously complex from both an organizational perspective and an ideological/thinking standpoint.
>
> During the mass mobilization for rent reduction, the Party branch has been given the first step in reorganization. But because the requirement and the level of the mass mobilization during the rent reduction are still low, the work of reorganizing the Party branches has had many shortcomings. Therefore, after the rent reduction, the rural Party branches in recently liberated areas are still complicated just as they are in the old free areas. There are places where they are even more seriously complicated. The situation with 76 Party branches in recently liberated areas that went through reorganization during the wave 3 of the land reform—in the three provinces of Bắc Giang, Vĩnh Phúc, and Sơn Tây—have shown clearly that: Party members belonging to the exploitative class still occupy 12.44 % of the branch, with an additional 26.18% being elements who surrendered, who gave themselves up, who carried out traitorous acts, along with other elements who participated in reactionary political organizations. If we count all the Party members who have relations with the exploitative class and with the reactionaries then the percentage of complicated [elements] rises up to 63.10% of the branch. There are Party branches that, despite having few Party members, are still very complicated.
>
> In the Party branches, here and there [lác đác], a small number of good Party members, who made contributions in the struggle agains the imperialists, may be found and need to be noted.
>
> Another thing that needs to be paid attention to is that within the Party branches in areas recently liberated there are still members of reactionary political parties. Within the 76 Party branches that went through land reform in wave 3 (the three provinces of Bắc Giang, Vĩnh Phúc, and Sơn Tây), there were upwards of 27 Party branches that had Nationalist Party and Anticommunist Youth elements in them. There were some people who were secretaries or executive members of the Nationalist Party: Thuận Mỹ (Sơn Tây), An Trường (Vĩnh Phúc), at the same time, they act as secretaries or executives of our Party. These reactionary political organizations are usually led by landlords. They make efforts to carry out sabotage: cut power wires, set mines to destroy the railroad, wreck irrigation dams, sabotage the harvest, fight against the mass mobilization, throw grenades into areas where our army is stationed, etc…[443]

[443] "Đề cương báo cáo của Bộ Chính trị tại Hội nghị Trung ương lần thứ 10, 25/8-5/10/1956" [Draft Politburo Report for the 10th Central Committee Plenum, 25/8 – 5/10/1956] *VKDTT 1956*, 441.

In other cases, the militant spirit of the Party leaders was conveyed more subtly through weak condemnations of aspects of the land reform that seem especially inhumane. For example, to what extent were children to be involved in the land reform? As a directive from the Party Secretariat released in August of 1955 explained:

> Mass mobilization teams need to pay attention to creating children's organizations [tổ chức thiếu nhi] in the countryside comprised of the children of working peasants. At the same time, [the teams] should strengthen the education of children, making them recognize clearly who is their friend, who is their enemy, and who we are, with an eye toward raising their vigilance with respect to the schemes of the landlords and rich peasants, who use children to investigate news and sabotage the mass mobilization movement. When trying the cases of cruel and despotic landlords or when confiscating, requisitioning, or carrying out compulsory purchases of the land and other property of the landlord, teams should not allow that landlord's children to watch. Such a scene may easily create a bad impression in the minds of these children, something that landlords could exploit to push children along the road to fighting against the peasants.[444]

Telling land reform teams that they "should not" [không nên] allow the children of landlords to watch their parents be tried and punished was hardly an unequivocal or strong way of conveying this message. Indeed, it seems more like advice for consideration rather than a hard and fast rule. It came with no threat of consequences. Perhaps equally revealing of the atmosphere of the campaign, though, was the fact that the directive made no mention of preventing other children in the community from seeing the parents of friends or acquaintances being tried and, in many cases, shot. It appears that in this case, the Party leaders were not averse to the "impression" that such acts would leave on the minds of a community's children.

Another part of the directive discussed how land reform teams should handle children considered to have committed "crimes" against the people:

> With respect to children who, being exploited by the enemy, were made to commit crimes against the people, the Youth Labor Brigade [Đoàn Thanh niên Lao động] and local authorities must point out clearly for the people and for the families of those children to recognize the enemy's scheme. The Youth Labor Brigade and local authorities should contribute ideas to the families about how to carry out education and fix their children. Avoid imprisoning [giam cầm] or trying young children who, having been incited by the enemy, committed crimes. For especial circumstances [where children need to be] brough to trial, land reform cadres need to report to higher-ups and ask for instructions.
>
> Chairman Hồ always reminds us that we need to recognize the importance work protecting and educating children, because we value the future of the people and care about the happiness of the people.[445]

But here again, the use of the relatively weak verb "avoid" [tránh] rather than much stronger phrases such as 'you must not' or 'under no circumstances shall you' with respect to the imprisonment or trial of children gives the passage the flavor of advice rather than the advancement of a strict rule. The writer of the directive seems to have felt a pang of anxiety

[444] "Chỉ thị của Ban Bí thư số 35-CT/TW, 8/1955: Về tăng cường công tác bảo vệ và giáo dục thiếu nhi" [Secretariat Directive no. 35, 8/1955: Strengthening the Work of Protecting and Educating Children], *VKDTT 1956*, 596.
[445] Ibid, 597.

about his reluctance to make a strong statement declaring that children were, under no circumstances, to be tried and punished in the land reform. This may explain the somewhat forced reminder that "Chairman Hồ" values children.

The CPSU 20th Congress: February 14-24, 1956

In the beginning of February, the Party general secretary Trường Chinh and fellow Politburo member Lê Đức Thọ would travel to Beijing to join the Chinese Communist Party delegation heading to the Soviet Union for the CPSU's 20th Congress, to be held in Moscow from February 14 to 24. It is important to note that Chinh, who would take much of the blame for the land reform's violence, was not present in the DRV for a crucial part of the largest wave of the campaign. Had Chinh played an indispensable role in the campaign's implementation, it seems unlikely that Nguyễn Tất Thành would have permitted him to leave the DRV for over a month during the most period of the land reform. In reality, the campaign was the collective project of the Politburo, which meant that no one person of that body was indispensable to its implementation. Hoàng Quốc Việt, Phạm Văn Đồng, and, of course, Thành himself, could just as easily meet with the Central Land Reform Committee and provide instructions to Hồ Viết Thắng, who shuttled back and forth between the Party leaders in Hà Nội and the land reform brigade leaders in the countryside, transmitting directions from to the people on the ground. Reports indicate that the land reform brigade leaders also made the trip back to Hà Nội to discuss the campaign with the Politburo members.

In Moscow, Trường Chinh and Lê Đức Thọ would not have attended the final, closed session of the 20th Congress, during which Khrushchev delivered his famous "secret speech" denouncing Stalin's crimes. But as the representatives of fraternal parties, they would have been given a copy of the speech to take back to Hà Nội for study. Nguyễn Tất Thành would adopt a policy of mentioning nothing to the public or to the Party rank and file about the denunciation of Stalin until April 1, 1956 issue of *The People*. The implications of the 20th Congress would be dealt with by the VWP at the 9th Plenum of the Central Committee held from April 19-24. The internal documents produced from that plenum would consider the question of the personality cult around Hồ Chí Minh and some of the other big messages of the Congress, but in none of the available documents from the meeting appear any significant rethinking of the land reform. For those Party leaders who were able to read a copy of the Secret Speech, they must have found it remarkable how relevant Khrushchev's depiction of Stalin's behavior, particularly during the period of the Great Terror, was to the DRV's land reform (the widespread use of torture to elicit false confessions, which would then be used as the justification for further repression, etc.).

Ten days after the close of the 9th Plenum, on May 5 and 6, the Central Land Reform Committee held its eighth meeting. Again, it seems significant that the meeting was held immediately after 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 read by Hồ Viết Thắng at that May 5 meeting about the situation with the land reform. As with virtually all Party reports on the implementation of policy, it took a linear approach, criticizing deviations both to the right and to the left of the imagined correct line. As mentioned before, such an approach seems to have been a necessary measure to defend the correctness of a policy from unsatisfactory results. But although Hồ Viết Thắng's report did discuss the use of torture by cadres to uncover reactionary

organizations and other excesses, on balance, it still leaned strongly to the side of rightist deviations as the primary danger to the success of the campaign. The report 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 Machiavelian, not stopping at the most barbaric and cruel actions.
>
> - 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 [khổ chủ] to prevent them from speaking bitterness. They even kill children in order to repress [uy hiếp] the spirit of the masses, murder cadres to carry out revenge, kill each other in order to silence clues. 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.

Hồ Viết Thắng's report to the Central Land Reform Committee, after describing the situation in the countryside in this way, 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 the order in which these successes were listed, it still 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 ring leaders and backbone elements while winning over [tranh thủ] and educating those people who took the wrong

path."[446] The second "success" was the expropriation of land and food from landlords; the third, the confiscation of weapons; fourth, the reorganization of Party and state political bodies at the local level; the fifth was (alleged) peasant enthusiasm for raising production; and the sixth success of the land reform was the "dogged working spirit" [tinh thần bền bỉ công tác] shown by the cadres, who were willing to "endure hardships" to complete their tasks.

After establishing these "successes," Hồ Viết 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 precisely 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 [bắt ẩu], repressing [enemies] without attempting to sow divisions as well). Signs of lack of organization 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 sobatage 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 in order not to be accused of exhibiting the "general" lack of determination while at the same time not take things too far, committing "leftist deviations?' Or, the cadre might ask, 'is the enemy still carrying out "serious acts of sabotage" because cadres have not been thorough enough or because they have not confined their strikes to the enemy ringleaders? How does that criticism translate into positive and specific directions about what to do?'

The 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 use to explain the violence of the campaign. "The task of building our forces, of reorganizing Party organizations, has not yet received the right amount of attention." Without naming a subject, Hồ Viết 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, Hồ Viết 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 agains the cruel and despotic landlords harder and more quickly. This is because we learned lessons from the experience from wave 4. As such, 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 [đại hội

[446] File 718. This file was provided to me by a friend in Hà Nội.

nông dân]. 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 communes, 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 [khí thế] for the masses and to lower the momentum of the enemy. Act 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:

a) Recently liberated areas have not yet passed through rent reduction, and we saw that the enemy was more stubborn than in the old liberated areas.
b) The masses were in an extremely wretched state having been occupied by the enemy for too long. They were extremely miserable and their hatred was high.

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 basically break apart [làm tan rã] reactionary organizations. Another factor [leading to the above steps] was that during the wave four, during the summing-up of that wave, many brigades criticized [cadres] for repressing recklessly in one direction. As a result of this, many cadres, whenever they would see saboteurs who were not landlords, or who [cadres] were not yet sure were landlords, they would not dare to touch them [đụng đến].

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 see the enemy's movement more clearly. As a result of that, [cadres] attacked the enemy more strongly, repressed saboteurs more promptly, and attacked more strongly the cruel despotic landlords and backbone elements of the counterrevolutionaries currently carrying out sabotage and constraining the masses.

But when striking strongly against the enemy, the enemy carried out sabotage a lot, leading to the use of torture to make people confess to being members of reactionary organizations [truy bức mớm cung tổ chức phản động, bắt ẩu, nhục hình]. 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, conceding that some aspects of the Party leadership'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 that official view had clearly not yet occurred, as the report still contained radicalizing elements in it similar to what had been used by

the Party leaders throughout much of the campaign, especially during the last year. A clear example is Hồ Viết Thắng's account of the land reform reinspection:

> REINSPECTION WORK
>
> 1. 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 reinspection, [cadres] still uncovered [truy ra] 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, 1 as a poor peasant, and five as rich peasants. As such, calculated the total number of landlords [for these communes] 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 communes assigned to the Phú Thọ land reform brigade for reinspection, 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 [chống lại pháp luật], the majority are in reactionary organizations. The carry out serious acts of sabotage. After the land reform and during the reinspection, they killed 53 peasants. (18 of those occurred during the reinspection 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.[447]

Throughout most of that month, the discourse in *The People* continued to mention landlords having slipped through the net, 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 mid-April, the Party leaders seem to have decided that the time had come to rein in the campaign. 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, Nguyễn Duy Trinh took cadres to task for "not investigating, researching, and checking docments [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 stuck on the land reform apparatus rather than the top Party leaders who conceived of and manipulated the campaign from start to finish:

> As for the reason why there were these mistakes, one part is the result of land reform cadres' political standpoint and thinking were unclear, their political and work level were

[447] File 716, Central Land Reform Committee.

> substandard. They did not grasp firmly the method and policy of constructing the party. But another part [of the reason for these mistakes] was a lack of closeness in the leadership of land reform brigade leaders and interzone leaders.[448]

Two days later, *The People* published an article titled, "Ally with Rich Peasants." Throughout the first week of June, articles that stressed leftist errors appeared in a somewhat contradictory fashion alongside articles still mentioning acts of sabotage. In this respect, the discourse in *The People* was similar in its inconsistency to Hồ Viết Thắng's report at the May 5 meeting of Central Land Reform Committee. By the end of the June, though, the discourse had transitioned more or less fully to the notion of the land reform as having been characterized primarily by leftist errors. 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 apparently begun to adopt the new view.[449]

Protecting "Uncle Ho" from the Contamination of the Land Reform

During this time, Nguyễn Tất Thành appears to have already begun to consider how he could best protect the reputation of his carefully constructed character, "Uncle Hồ," from the violence of the land reform. First and foremost, "Uncle Hồ" had to have been unaware of what had been happening in the campaign. But what about the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of letters and appeals [đơn khiếu nại] sent to Hồ Chí Minh by Party members and other people who were troubled by what was happening during the campaign? It is entirely plausible that people would have sent petitions to "Hồ Chí Minh" because of the way he had been constructed by Thành as the "father of the Vietnamese people," a folksy, down-to-earth exemplar of morality, the type of person who, seeing wrong, would always have the courage to speak out. We can see in the June 29, 1956 directive below the strategy adopted by Thành and the Party leaders for overcoming the danger that the land reform's violence posed to their image of "Uncle Ho":

> From before up until now, and especially after the establishment of peace, there were many personal and unit [đơn vị] appeals sent to 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 having over 80 letters. Among those, the majority were appeals for [Chairman Hồ] to reconsider cases of injustice [oan ức] during the land reform or the [Party] reorganization. There were letters from Party members, and there were also many petitions sent by fellow countrymen from all classes.
>
> With the exception of a few petitions of a provocative character that were sent by saboteurs, most petitions were inspired by offices of mass organizations, the government, and the party at the local level having dealt with work in a way that is not yet truly appropriate [thích đáng]. And there were also incidences of [these offices] handling things incorrectly or, having

[448] 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 1956*, 199.

[449] This is according to a description of that 9th Meeting of the Central Land Reform Committee contained in a later report by that committee.

> handled the thing correctly but not explaining the move carefully, resulting in the current concerns.[450]

Somehow, a convincing narrative of those letters not reaching Hồ Chí Minh would have to be created:

> In order to resolve those appeals, according to a directive of the Central Committee, an office [bộ phận] was established in the Office of the Presidency, which has the following responsibilities:
>
> - Promptly investigate these appeals, put forward the ideas in them to Chairman Hồ for consideration and also discuss a method of resolving [the issue] with the responsible offices and localities in accordance with each incident.
> - Keep track of the way each office and local resolves the problem.
>
> Because it wants the newly established Presidential 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 Hồ, 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 Presidential 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 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 Hồ.
>
> 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 Hồ, contributing to the implementation of the Party and Government's policies.[451]

With Hồ Chí Minh's lack of knowledge of what had happened during the land reform having been established, the path was clear for his overall assessment of the campaign and its "errors." On July 1, he penned a letter to be read at the summing-up meetings for the twenty-nine land reform brigades (roughly 30,000 cadres) that were now finishing the final fifth wave. The letter was brief, only about a page in length. Thành assessed the campaign as follows: "Wave 5 of the land reform was intense and complicated. But thanks to the Party and Government's correct

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[450] Nguyễn Duy Trinh, "Thông tri của Ban Bí thư, số 37/TT-TW, 29/6/1956: Về việc xét và giải quyết các đơn yêu cầu và khiếu nại của cá nhân, đơn vị gửi Hồ Chủ tich" [Secretariat Communique, no 37, 29/6/1956] Considering and Resolving Individual and Unit Requests and Appeals Sent to Chairman Hồ], *VKDTT 1956*, 264.
[451] Ibid, 264-265.

policy, the support of countrymen from different classes, and the efforts of cadres, the campaign attained *a basic and big victory*." The victory, according to Thành, was the overthrow of the landlord class, the distribution of land to peasants, the "purification" of commune level political organizations, and the "training" [rèn luyện] received by cadres recruited to serve the campaign. "These victories," the letter explained, "had an important meaning with respect to the struggle to unify the country." What precisely that "meaning" was, Nguyễn Tất Thành did not explain, but we will consider that question presently.

Then the letter turned to the issue of the "mistakes."

> But wave 5 of the land reform also committed more than a few mistakes, which limited to some extent our achievements.
>
> The Central Committee carried out self-criticism.
>
> All of you now need to review carefully [kiểm điểm kỹ] your work, judging correctly the successes and the weaknesses. Of course one cannot see successes and become arrogant. And of course, one cannot see weaknesses and become despondent. You must sincerely carry out criticism and self-criticism in order always to improve.[452]

There was no mention of specifics with respect to the Central Committee's "self-criticism," but Thành's statement that the land reform policy had been "correct" [đúng đắn], along with the fact that Central Committee members had not been in the trenches trying to implement the policy, left room for little else besides mistakes in how the campaign was led.

About a month and half later, on August 18, Thành published his public assessment of the campaign on the front page of *The People*. As with the July 1 statement to land reform cadres, he would begin 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 [long trời lở đất]. 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 followed the correct mass line; and because the Central Committee and Government's leadership of the campaign lacked concreteness in some aspects, lacked 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 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 has 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.*[453]

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[452] Hồ Chí Minh [Nguyễn Tất Thành], "Thư gửi hội nghị tổng kết cải cách ruộng đất đợt 5" [Letter Sent to the Summing-Up Meeting of Wave 5 of the Land Reform], *HCMTT 1955-1957*, 194.

[453] Hồ Chí Minh [Nguyễn Tất Thành], "Thư của Hồ Chủ tịch gửi đồng bào nông thôn và cán bộ nhân dịp cải cách ruộng đất ở miền Bắc căn bản thành công." [Letter Sent by Chairman Hồ to Compatriots and Cadres in the Countryside on the Occasion of the Land Reform's Basic Success], *Nhân dân* [The People], no. 897, August 18, 1956.

Three days later, possibly (still) concerned about the issue of the letters that had been sent to him complaining about the crimes and injustices of the land reform, Nguyễn Tất Thành published an article under his alias, C.B., titled "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 make an effort to fix their mistakes. If the criticism is not truly correct in some aspect, it must be clearly explained so that the masses understand. But whether the criticism is entirely correct or correct only in part, 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 the government, from top to bottom, are all the servants of the people, and 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.[454]

"Water off a duck's back," Thành may have feared, was an expression that people might have used to describe his response to hundreds of letters of complaint about the land reform that had been sent to him. In my research, I have come across no example of Thành's having intervened to save any person targeted in the campaign. Almost as though this thought were on his mind, his article then moved to the issue of letters and petitions in another apparent attempt to suggest how these might not have reached him and the other top-Party leaders—that is, how it would have been possible for them 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 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 commune in Nam Ninh district). There are cadres who threatened the people because they sent letters to higher-ups (such as the vice-Chairman 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 has to 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.[455]

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[454] C.B. [Nguyễn Tất Thành], "Phải xem trọng ý kiến của quần chúng" [The Ideas of the Masses Must be Respected], *Nhân dân* [The People], no. 900, August 21, 1956.
[455] Ibid.

All these instructions about "sincerity" and the importance of putting one's "entire name" on letters were written by Nguyễn Tất Thành under one of his many pen names, "C.B." The sincerity of his claims to welcome open criticism from the masses would soon be tested by dozens of disgruntled DRV intellectuals in Hà Nội who would begin publishing independent journals, the most famous of which being the *Master Works* [Giai phẩm] literary journal and the newspaper *Humanity* [Nhân văn].[456] It is surely no coincidence that the editors of *Humanity* included on the front page of their first issue a passage from Nguyễn Tất Thành's book *Fix the Way of Working*, which he had published under the pseudonym "X.Y.Z." in late 1947.[457] That book was a guide book describing the proper behavior of Party members. 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* [Nói thật, mất lòng] in November of 1950.[458] The editors of *Humanity* introduced their passage from Thành's book (which stressed the importance of courageously and openly accepting criticism) as follows: "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 dealing with criticism." (Thành and the other Party leaders would tolerate this cheeky, but still loyal, newspaper for about three months (five total issues) before closing it down along with the other journals produced independently by DRV intellectuals.)

The Central Land Reform Committee's Internal Assessment of the Campaign

At some point in the weeks after Thành's August 18 "Letter on the Completion of the Land Reform, the Central Land Reform Committee met for the ninth time. We saw that Hồ Viết Thắng's report read at that May 5 meeting had been an inconsistent mixture of continued stubborn militancy combined with some concessions to the "rightist" point of view that was starting to come into ascendance. A few months later, the Central Land Reform Committee released another report about the campaign. It was titled, "Recognize Mistakes and Resolutely Fix them to Take Advantage of the Victory and Complete the Land Reform Well." The first section was titled, "The Problem of Striking the Enemy" [Vấn dề đánh địch]:

> Generally speaking, during wave 5 and also during the early waves, the task of overthrowing the cruel and despotic landlords achieved results. But the mistake of this task was attacking the enemy indiscriminantly, striking at the peasants themselves, and even striking against cadres and Party members. Many families that had contributed to the revolution or families of martyred soldiers were also attacked heavily.
>
> In the beginning, we only mobilized the masses for rent reduction, during which the policy was to overthrow the cruel despotic landlord ringleaders, differentiating between the cruel and despotic landlords in order to reduce the scope of attack. When we came to the land reform, the requirement of overthrowing the entire landlord class, overthrowing all cruel and despotic, meant that the demand [for striking the enemy] was raised higher and the situation was more complicated. And the leaders [of the campaign] did not carry out enough inspection

[456] "Thuốc đắng dã tật, nói thật mất lòng" [Bitter Medicine Cures the Disease, Speak the Truth and Offend Somebody], *Nhân văn* [Humanity], no. 1, September 20, 1956.
[457] X.Y.Z. [Nguyễn Tất Thành], *Sửa đổi lối làm việc* [Change the Way of Working] (sixth printing), [Sự thật, 1955].
[458] X.Y.Z. [Nguyễn Tất Thành], *Thuốc đắng dã tật* [Bitter Medicine Cures the Disease] (Tiến bộ, November 15, 1950).

and research, only stressing that [cadres] must not allow a cruel and despotic landlord to slip through the net, with the result that cadres [bên dưới] just continued to try to find cruel despotic landlords. In communes, villages, and during wave 4, in many recently liberated places, cadres accused [many people] of being special cruel despots [cường hào gian ác cá biệt]. As a result of that, the scope of the attack grew larger with every day. This was especially the case with the wave 4 of the land reform and wave 8 of the rent reduction, when the slogan "fight against enemy sabotage" was put forward, and in wave 5, when the slogan "basically break apart reactionary organizations." After that, the leaders [of the campaign] specifically pushed [thúc dục] people to attack the enemy, so the scope of the attack increased more still, and the use of coercion became even more of a problem.

As a result of incorrectly judging the enemy, many deaths were assumed to be cases of enemy murder. Then [cadres] would use coercion [truy bức] to discover [the culprit]. And so many people who were not saboteurs had to admit that they were saboteurs, and many people who were not reactionaries had to admit that they were reactionaries.

Through efforts to fix mistakes, through comparing notes [liên hệ] during the summing-up meetings of the land reform, we have been able to reexamine many deaths, verifying that they were actually cases of people dying from sickness or people committing suicide as a result of being coerced and tortured. Mr. Điêm in Anh-sơn District, 65 years old, was coerced non-stop for seven days and nights. Unable to endure any longer, he wrote a note refusing to confess to being a reactionary and then committed suicide. Mr. Đức in Thanh-chương, a middle peasant who was bumped up to cruel and despotic landlord, was coerced to the point that he had to admit to being the leader of a reactionary organization, which led to his being sentenced to 20 years in prison. A comrade who was the vice-secretary of Ngọc Sơn commune (Hà Nam province) was accused of being a reactionary. His hands were tied up and his legs put in irons. When he ate his meals, his food was put in a bowl of urine. In the end, this comrade had to admit that he was a reactionary. Because of an incorrect understanding [nhận thức sai lầm], absolutely anything that happened was blamed on the enemy and was a case of sabotage. Then there places where the enemy confessed falsely, and these cases were not investigated and studied. Whoever the enemy falsely fingered would be arrested [địch khai đến đâu, bắt người đến đấy]. As a result of that, chaotic situations of arrests were common, with some communes having over 100 people arrested (Tân-quạng). There was a family where husband, wife, and 14 year-old child were all accused of being reactionaries. The most arrests were carried out during wave 5, when …… people were arrested. In this number were 13,865 cruel and despotic landlords, 6, 152 regular landlords who participated in sabotage, with the rest being rich peasants and working people. Among this number, ……were tried [xử], and ……. were released [thả].

These indiscriminant arrests created a great deal of damage, not just violating people's freedom and violating State laws, but also creating an extremely tense situation in the countryside that [negatively] impacted the mass's production. Another mistake was that in many places, after arresting people, their property was immediately sealed off [niêm phong], limiting the ability of people in the house to eat and drink every day. Older people and children in houses that were put under arrest lacked food and became exhausted, in some cases, dying. Those people who were arrested and imprisoned were subjected to every type of torture to elicit a confession of membership in a reactionary organization or to having carried out acts of sabotage: torture through beating, deprivation of food, being tied up and hung from the beam of a house, there were even people who had a horse bit put into their mouths. There were people who, unable to endure, committed suicide. Others ended up being permanently disabled.

> In addition to the reckless arrests, [cadres] threw out accusations of 'being a reactionary' every which where, with the vast majority of communes being accused of being reactionary. There were communes where hundreds of people were accused of being reactionaries. There were hamlets where the majority of people were [accused of being] reactionaries.
>
> As a result of these indiscriminant arrests, the use of coercion, and the eliciting of false confessions [mớm cung], the trying of cases increasing committed serious mistakes. In wave 5 alone, ……. people were imprisoned and …….. people were shot. Now, looking back upon these not yet complete numbers, we see that …….. people were imprisoned unjustly and …….. people were shot unjustly. Among those who were sentenced injustly, there were many people who were cadres, who had made contributions during the period of the resistance war. Those who were injustly sentenced were usually comrades from communes and hamlets who were bumped up [kích lên] to cruel and despotic landlords or accused of sabotage and tried unjustly.
>
> […]
>
> The land reform mistakes described above were also put into practice during the reinspection. During the reinspection, coercion and torture were also used to discover the enemy. The incorrect discovery of enemies during the reinspection affected the land reform, pushing [that phase] to make even worse mistakes.[459]

The report from the Central Land Reform Committee also touched upon the issue of class demarcation in the land reform, which was a "very important task" of the land reform because it "determined the boundary between friend and enemy."

> Looking at the ratios [of class demarcation], we see that with an appropriate ratio of class demarcation, the number of landlords and rich peasants, compared with the documented information [tài liệu] we held before [the land reform], was not a lot. But we have recently discovered that many people were incorrectly bumped up to landlords and rich peasants. And within the landlord class, rarely were people labeled as revolutionary landlords. Many rich peasants, middle peasants, and a number of poor peasants were bumped up to rich peasants. In recently liberated regions, people were not only incorrectly labeled as normal landlords but also as cruel and despotic landlords. Incorrect class demarcation happened not only in wave 5 but in all the previous waves as well. In Thanh Hóa, the reinspection of 31 communes from wave 3 has revealed that 48 middle and rich peasants were bumped up to landlords. In Phú Thọ, the reinspection of 67 communes has shown that in 41 of them, there were 83 people incorrectly labeled as landlords.
>
> In wave five alone there 15, 644 people labeled as cruel and despotic landlords, but through correction 2,945 had their class lowered. 47, 620 people were labeled as normal landlords, of which 6,674 were found to have been done so incorrectly. In addition to that, corrections were made for 3,728 rich peasants and people who rented out only a small amount of land. Why were so many people given the wrong class? It was due to [cadres] not grasping the demarcation criteria and not grasping the policy, but mainly it was due to the leadership [lãnh đạo] frequently forcing the use of a maximum ratio [tỷ lệ] and not basing it concretely on the changes in class relations of society from the August Revolution to today, especially the 8 years of resistance war.

[459] File 716. Central Land Reform Committee.

> Not only was the class demarcation full of mistakes, but differential treatment was lacking. Landlords were usually all labeled like each other. The children of landlords were also treated like landlords. Rich peasants were hardly treated differently to landlords.
> […]
> These mistakes in class demarcation and the confiscation, requisition, and forced sale of property created a great deal of damage in the countryside: it turned friends into enemies, pushed working peasants to the side of the exploiting class, created prejudice against people related [to landlords], brothers and sisters denounced each other, wives denounced their husbands, children denounced their parents, causing damage to family life [tình cảm gia đình], to the unity of the Front, and pushed a number of people to oppose us. On the other hand, after having been incorrectly labeling people, [cadres] then isolated them, going overboard with respression [trấn áp tràn lan]. This led to heartbreaking scenes of death. There were places where peasants were incorrectly labeled as cruel despotic landlords and all their property confiscated, with the husband imprisoned, the wife, hungry, had to resort to begging. She would get sick and die, leaving behind an orphaned child [con dại].[460]

The report then returned to the issue of the damage caused to the Party by the "reorganization" that accompanied the land reform.

> Right now, we cannot yet calculate the total number of commune level cadres and Party members who were tortured, subject to house arrest, imprisoned, shot, or who committed suicide. But according to the statistics for fifth wave, the number of cadres and Party members imprisoned or shot unjustly in Interone 4 is upwards of …….. commune and hamlet level cadres who committed suicide or were tortured to death. In the province of Nam Định there were upwards of ……. commune and hamlet level cadres were tortured, of which 28 have become disabled and 20 committed suicide. In addition to that, …… commune cadres and party members were incorrectly labeled as cruel and despotic landlords, as the leaders of reactionary organizations, and subsequently shot. […][461]

Internal Politburo Report on the Land Reform

As mentioned above, the Central Committee held its 10th Expanded Plenum from August 25 through to October 5, 1956, at the end of which were produced two more accounts of the land reform. The first was a twelve-page section in the "Draft Report of the Politburo for the Central Committee's 10th Plenum." That document was intended for Party eyes only and was similar in some of its basic arguments to the above-described report from the Central Land Reform Committee (the writers of which may have followed the cues of Politburo's document to some extent). Thus the Politburo report mentioned in a less detailed way the fact that "coercion and torture were common" during the campaign. And, with respect to the causes of the violence (the "mistakes"), the Politburo document also acknowledged the primary responsibility of the Party leadership, though spread the blame among the entire Central Committee:

> The main reason for the mistakes described above was that the leadership with respect to the Central Committee's line and policy was not based enough on the actual situation in our country

[460] Ibid.
[461] Ibid.

> and on the urgent needs of the revolution: the consolidation of the North and the struggle to unify our country.

The internal Politburo report provided a few other "unchecked" [chưa kiểm tra] statistics that did not appear in the Central Land Reform Committee's report. Concerning the Party purge, for example, the report stated that 2,876 of the Party's total 3,777 branches underwent "reorganization," meaning roughly 150,000 of out a total of about 175,000 members. Apparently 84,000 Party members had been "disciplined" [xử trí] during the campaign, while 36,000 new people gained entry. A number of these new recruits had joined the Party during the rent reduction phase of the campaign, but had then been "purged" [khai trừ] during the land reform phase. Of the 8,829 Party members disciplined in the Left Bank interzone, about 7,000 were working class peasants or other such workers. Hà Tĩnh province seems to have been one of the places targeted most harshly by the campaign, with "just about all" Party branches having been classified as "dominated by reactionaries." Apparently, all 19 members of the provincial Party leadership were were convicted of being reactionaries.

In the next and concluding chapter of this study, we will focus on how the Party leaders explained the land reform to the people of the DRV and to the wider world. We will pay particular attention to the speech delivered by Võ Nguyên Giáp on October 29, 1956 and published in *The People* two days later. That speech, in my opinion, has been the most important in shaping Western views of the land reform and still serves today as a general guide for how SRV historians may discuss the campaign.

Conclusion: The Võ Nguyên Giáp Land Reform Speech of October 29, 1956

In terms of shaping both official SRV and Western views of the land reform, one of the most important documents was a public speech delivered by Võ Nguyên Giáp to "people of the capital" on October 29, 1956. It was published in *The People* two days later, taking up over thirteen full length columns of the newspaper. The historian Edwin Moise, in his 1982 monograph on the land reform, quoted Giáp's speech at length, taking it more or less at face value as both a description of and an explanation for what had happened during the campaign. Moise certainly had the speech in mind when he referred to the Party leadership's assessment of the land reform as "one of the most remarkable examples of self-criticism in the history of Communism." Some of the internal Party documents examined in this study, however, raise questions about aspects of Giap's depiction of the land reform in his speech. The overall message of his report is reflected in the basic idea that the Party leaders, as Moise argued, "had no idea how widespread and fundamental the errors had become" until the summer of 1956, when the campaign was virtually completed.[462]

In the official DRV version of the campaign, two words are of paramount importance. The first is "error," which the Party leaders quickly introduced as an orthodox euphemism for the violence and injustice of the campaign. To call the actions of cadres "errors" or "mistakes" [sai lầm] was to suggest that they were departures from what the Party leadership 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 the high levels of violence in the campaign had not been intended by the Party leadership.

Since the land reform had lasted over three years, though, the characterization of the campaign's violence and injustices as errors, while theoretically exonerating the Party leaders from ill intent, still potentially exposed them to the accusation of neglect or incompetence. If there had been errors, why had the Party leaders not done something about them? The land reform had lasted over three years. Thus the term "discovered" helped to exonerate the Party leaders from the accusation of having known about (if having not intended) the errors and having done little if anything to stop them. Assuming this to be true, however, still left the question of why the Party leaders had discovered the errors so late. Did it not suggest a fundamental weakness in the Party leaders themselves and in the DRV's political system as a whole that such alleged errors could go so long undiscovered by those in charge? To this, the regime would later add to its official narrative the notion that the errors had occurred primarily in the last few months of the campaign, during the fifth and final wave.

Giáp divided his speech into two sections. The first (about three quarters of the speech) he devoted to the land reform campaign and the second to the DRV's policies moving forward. The two thirds dealing with the land reform were divided into two subsections, with the first providing an anlaysis of the campaign and the second describing measures that would be adopted by the Party leaders to "correct the errors" that had occurred.

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[462] Moise, 238.

Part 1, History of the Land Reform Policies

In the first part, Võ Nguyên Giáp described the Party's published policies dealing with the land reform, quoting extensively from the Party's "Political Program on Land" [Cương lĩnh ruộng đất] and the Land Reform Law approved by the National Assembly in December 1953. Giáp's selection of quotes from Party resolutions appears to have been geared toward building a picture of top-Party moderation. Thus, for example, he cited a passage from a Politburo resolution of August 1953:

> We are carrying out land reform during a resistance war, so we must struggle on two fronts: the anti-imperialist front and the anti-feudal front. We also have a broad United Vietnam front. As such, the more we reduce the number of enemies we have the better; the more we isolate and divide up the landlord class the better. The scope of our attack [on the landlord class] should not be too broad.[463]

By removing this quote from its context within the August 1953 Politburo resolution, Giáp encouraged an interpretation of the Politburo's intentions that was different from the overall thrust of that resolution.

First of all, it needs to be pointed out that Giáp left off the final sentence of the paragraph: "The slogan 'neutralize the rich peasants' needs to be changed to 'ally with the rich peasants'." In addition to his desire not to dampen the effect of the sentence he liked best, "The scope of our attack should not be too broad," Giáp may have wished to avoid the final sentence because it might invite the reader to conclude that violence committed by mass mobilization cadres was a response to directions from above. Also, he had written erroneously that the Party's policy as it was first conceived by the Politburo was to "ally with the rich peasants." To include the sentence about changing the slogans would reveal that he had incorrectly depicted the way the Politburo first conceived its policy. The point was to depict cadre violence as a deviation from the Politburo's allegedly moderate policy. Acknowledging that the top Party leaders had originally conceived of rich peasants as enemies who needed to be "neutralized" did not cohere with that image of moderation.

Even more significantly, though, was Giáp's substitution of the word "land reform" in the first sentence of the quote for "land policy," which was how it was written in the original Politburo resolution: "We are carrying out our land policy during a resistance war…" The original resolution had not used "land reform" because it was only discussing the rent reduction phase of the campaign. Apparently Giáp wanted people to think that this statement was about the land reform and perhaps also did not want to draw attention to the fact that the campaign had been envisioned as having two phases, a more moderate rent reduction phase to pave the way for a more radical land reform phase. The paragraph from the Poliburo resolution immediately following the one quoted by Giáp in his report makes absolutely clear the fact that the statement about lowering the "scope of attack" referred to the rent reduction, not the land reform:

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[463] Võ Nguyên Giáp, "Bài nói chuyện của đồng chí Võ Nguyên Giáp, ủy viên Bộ Chính trị Trung ương Đảng Lao động Việt Nam, về Nghị quyết của Hội nghị Trung ương lần thứ 10 tại cuộc mít tinh 29/10/1956 của nhân dân thủ đô" [Talk Given at 29/10/1956 Meeting of People of the Capital by Comrade Võ Nguyên Giáp, VWP Politburo Member, on the Resolution of the 10th Central Committee Plenum], *Nhân dân* [The People], no. 970, October 31, 1956.

> What we are aiming at is land reform, of course not just rent reduction. We have to focus organizing and educating the peasants in order to prepare the conditions for a fast move upward to land reform. As such, the demand of the struggle at this point should not be too high, the way of working should not be too burdensome, and the time for mobilization should not be too extended.[464]

Thus we can see how Giáp, by changing a few key words and leaving out important context, made the Politburo seem to have been a force for moderation in the early months of the campaign. The actual thrust of the August 1953 resolution, however, was the idea that the rent reduction phase was supposed to be a "preliminary" [sơ bộ] attack on the landlord class. As the resolution explained, "The landlord class cannot be completely overthrown all in one shot."

Continuing to follow this approach of pulling out moderate phrases, he then moved to the period after the signing of the Geneva Accords, quoting from the September Politburo resolution discussed in chapter five.

> After peace was re-established, many cities were liberated, and our nation was divided into two halves. Before this new situation, the September resolution of the Politburo, in its part on the land reform, stated clearly: "On the one hand, with all our might, satisfy the economic and political demands of the peasants in order to mobilize the peasants and win over their support. On the other hand, with full commitment, broaden the antifeudal front and the United People's Front. Unify all forces that can be unified and neutralize any forces that can be neutralized. This is done to win over the majority, isolate the minority, consolidate the peace, and unify [the country].

Giáp's quote from the September Politburo resolution, seen by itself out of context, could easily be interpreted as a call by the Party leaders, in response to the new conditions of peace, for the land reform policy to be moderated yet further, with the "broadening" of the fronts seeming to imply a narrowing of the segment of society targeted by the land reform. But Giáp made no mention of the fact that the Politburo resolution had stressed that the land reform policy had "basically not changed," despite all the talk of broadening the fronts. Indeed, the broadening of the front was meant to be applied as a strategy for winning over the South, where anyone willing to oppose the RVN government, even a landlord, was to be treated as a friend (for the time being).

Võ Nguyên Giáp then put forward some of the changes in the methods of carrying out the campaign as further evidence of the Party's moderation.

> And as a result of that way of thinking on the part of the [Party] leadership, the Politburo passed a few supplements to the land reform policy and the method of carrying out the struggle that were very appropriate: using courts for the form and method of struggle instead of the peasant struggle meetings, reducing the amount of land confiscated and requisitioned, and expanding the amount of land obtained through mandatory purchase [trưng mua], setting the regulations for donating land, making allowances for revolutionary landlords and those landlords whose children served in the military or as revolutionary officials, making allowances for industrialist landlords and religious leaders, etc. etc.[465]

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[464] "Nghị quyết của Bộ Chính trị, 8-9/8/1953: Về chỉnh đốn công tác phát động quần chúng" [Politburo Resolution, 8-9/8/1953: Reorganization Work during the Mass Mobilization], *VKDTT 1953*, 279.
[465] Giáp speech, 29/10/1956.

The nature of these changes was examined at length in chapter five of this study. They were inspired first and foremost by the threat of being flagged for violations of the Geneva Accords and the fear that the land reform would motivate more people to emigrate, a key piece of context that Giáp does not provide. Absent of this context, the passage above appears to show this policy and the changes to the land reform policy as yet more moves in a long, unbroken chain of moderation from the Party leaders.

Giáp also does not provide some of the key details about the how these changes actually functioned. For example, as we saw, the switch to the use of "special people's courts" (Giáp carefully only refers to them as "courts," surely to downplay their special revolutionary character) was a way of speeding up the process of delivering verdicts and carrying out punishments and evading the danger of discovery by the ICC. What the Party leaders had stressed with the courts was that they had to deliver their verdicts "promptly" [kịp thời]. Indeed, speed was such an overriding concern that any seemingly competent land reform cadre could serve as the judge on one of these courts. With respect to the issue of donating land, we also saw that that decision was ultimately in the hands of the peasants of the respective community (which is to say with the land reform apparatus).

In his part on the policies, Giáp stopped at the September resolution of the Politburo, stating that the moderate highlights he had carefully selected, pulled out of context, edited when needed, and distorted, were the "major features of the Party's policy." Thus the fury expressed by the Party leaders over "rightist errors" being committed by land reform cadres in the wake of the Geneva Accords, the Politburo's movement of the Party purge successively upward from commune, to district, and then to the provincial level, the establishment of the "land reform reinspection" as a tool to put further pressure on the land reform brigade leaders to find more landlords, and other ways in which the campaign's policies put pressure on cadres to find targets of struggle—received no mention from Giáp.

Part Two: The Land Reform as a "Basic Success"

The second section of Võ Nguyên Giáp's report explained why the land reform had, despite its errors, still been a success. "Today, in the North, in truth the landlord class has basically been overthrown. Land has returned to the hands of the peasants. More than 10 million peasants are now owners of the countryside. Tens of thousands of backbone [poor peasants] have received training. The feudal land tenure system has been destroyed forever." According to the speech, this "enormous transformation" had led to a fundamental change in the consciousness of peasants in the North.

> Millions of working peasants have seen that only the Vietnamese Workers Party and only the democratic republican regime gives them land. The large forces of production in the countryside have been liberated and the relations of production are going through a new change. As a result, agricultural production has begun to be pushed forward [bước đầu được đẩy mạnh], and the lives of the peasants have begun to be improved. The countryside has stepped into a new phase in agricultural development that will open the road for the development of industry, making an important contribution to the consolidation of the North and to economic and cultural development.

With respect to the comment about the land reform having given peasants land, Giáp made no mention of the fact that the plan for the countryside was to eliminate not just the feudal land tenure system but the entire institution of private property. By the middle of 1955, the VWP leaders were already discussing the need to press forward more or less immediately with collectivization after the land reform had been completed, lest the peasants, upon receiving land, begin to develop a "rich peasant mentality" that would lead them "down the capitalist road." If the peasants saw that "only the democratic republic" gave them land, how would their thinking about the regime be impacted when their newly received land was collectivized?

Another small but significant detail of the passage is Giáp's handling of the issue of agricultural production. According to the theory of the land reform, "liberating the forces of production" in the countryside should lead to a significant boost in agricultural production. By October 29, when he delivered the talk, the vast majority of peasants should have just completed their October harvest, giving the Party leaders a general idea of what the economic impact of the land reform had been. Giáp provided not a single quantitative example of a region that had actually raised production in any significant way. Indeed, when describing the economic impact of the campaign, my guess is that Giáp would have thought hard about his language. The typical word used by the Party leaders to describe the goal of their agricultural policies was "raise" [tăng gia] production. Thus, apparently Giáp could not quite bring himself to use this term, choosing the much vaguer "pushed forward" [đẩy mạnh], which suggested that something positive had happened, that production was headed in the right direction, but did not go so far as to claim that it had actually risen in any significant way.

Part Three: The Party Leaders "Discover the Errors"

The third part of Võ Nguyên Giáp's speech discussed the negative aspects of the land reform that had "significantly limited" the overall success of the campaign. As we will recall, in the first section of his speech, he had strung together moderate-sounding fragments from various writings by the Party leaders on the campaign and claimed that these represented the "basic features of the Party's land policy." Now came the part of the speech where the narrative would exonerate the Party leaders and the Central Committee from negative things that had happened:

> The [Recently concluded 10th] Plenum of the Central Committee has heard many reports sent to from various places and has listened to [reports] from Central Committee members who were sent to inspect the situation at the local level. And we have discussed these findings a great deal in order to see the entirety of the mistakes that occurred and to criticize them.

Võ Nguyên Giáp would have his listeners and readers believe that Central Committee members would have needed to hear special reports from localities in order to know what had been happening during the land reform. First, many Central Committee members, occupying positions as interzone leaders, would have been directly responsible for coordinating the work of land reform brigades in their interzones. Second, as we saw in the latter part of the last chapter, some Central Committee members appear to have been seriously concerned about the violence and injustice of the campaign at the 7th Plenum in March 1955, calling upon the Politburo to reconsider the mass mobilization policy. And third, as the wielders of power and influence, and having generally come from elite rural families themselves, most Central Committee members would have had far-reaching professional and familial ties to the countryside themselves or at

least worked closely with comrades who did. From this perspective alone, it is implausible that they would not have been fully aware of what was happening with the campaign.

Next, Võ Nguyên Giáp turned to the issue of what Central Committee members had allegedly found out from these reports:

> *The Party and Government's line for the countryside had not been implemented thoroughly and, in some cases, had been violated*. Looking generally, land reform cadres, in their thinking, did pay attention to relying on landless and poor peasants, and because of that, were able to mobilize the peasant forces to overthrow the landlord class. But because they did not believe in the "old organizations," which included many excellent poor peasant elements, because they attacked the enemy in a widespread manner, because they, in some places, raised the acreage and yield levels of peasants too much [một cách quá đáng], even a number of poor peasants were put at a disadvantage or were attacked.

One of the key difficulties faced by Giáp in advancing this narrative of cadre deviation was explaining the role of the class demarcation ratios devised by the Party leaders to serve as a guide for cadres. As we have seen, these compelled cadres to work according to the principle that 5.68 percent of a village's population should be labeled as landlords. Rigid insistence that cadres follow these ratios was arguably the most important factor leading to many of the negative aspects of the campaign (primarily the large number of loyal DRV supporters targeted and the widespread use of torture to elicit confessions). How would Giáp depict the issue of the landlord ratio?

> There were many errors in the implementation of the Party and Government's land reform policy, primarily in the issues of class demarcation, striking the enemy, and Party reorganization.
>
> Having not carried out enough inspection and research, having assumed that the ratio of landlords in society was relatively high, having not grasped the regulations of class demarcation, having not absorbed the thinking behind the policies, the task of class demarcation saw many serious errors. Not only were rich peasants and upper-level middle peasants classified in many places as landlords, but there were places where even poor peasants were labeled as landlords. In reality, friends were turned into enemies, and as a result, the forces of the enemy class were magnified artificially.
>
> As a result of having mechanically viewed all landlords as the enemy (with some places even seeing resistance war landlords as the enemy), having not differentiated between the acts of resistance carried out by a few stubborn landlords [and other actions], and having created a tense situation through incorrect implementation of the policy, the enemy was overestimated. The enemy was considered to be in every place. When carrying out repression, doing so with determination was stressed more than doing so with care, [leading to] the illegal use of coercion. The policy of repressing active saboteurs was not applied correctly, and this contributed to expanding the scope of the struggle. The result was that many innocent people were accused of being reactionaries and arrested, punished, kept under surveillance, or isolated.

Thus, as we can see from the above passage, with his careful avoidance of specifically stating an active subject, Giáp was hardly clear about who or what body was responsible for "overestimating" the enemy. But the strong implication was that the fault lay with either cadres

or higher-level comrades running the land reform apparatus. Who else but they would have "not grasped the regulations of class demarcation"? It made little sense to think that the Party leaders would have not grasped the meaning of a regulation that they themselves had created.

Part Four: The Land Reform Apparatus' Independent Character, The Vagueness of Party Policies, The Land Reform as Deviation from Marxist-Leninst Principles

In the fourth part of his speech's land reform section, Võ Nguyên Giáp addressed such issues as the Marxist notion of "praxis" (and how it had been incorrectly applied in the case of the land reform), the notion of the anti-imperialist task as more important in the Vietnamese context than the anti-feudal task, the need to avoid "classism" (the assumption that class explains all behavior), the independent organizational character of the land reform apparatus, and the weaknesses of Party policies. Again, virtually all of Giáp's arguments on these fronts seem to have been geared toward the single goal of convincing people that the widespread violence and injustice of the campaign had not been the intention of the Party leaders.

Giáp discussed the organization of the land reform apparatus as a factor contributing to the campaign's "left deviations." As he explained, "The land reform offices were organized into a separate system from top to bottom and given too much authority. Gradually they ate into the authority of local Party executive committees and administrative offices." To say that the land reform apparatus "gradually" usurped the power of local Party organizations is an odd way of describing an apparatus that was created by the Politburo for the specific purpose of purging those Party organizations. Indeed, the Politburo had given the land reform apparatus full power over local organizations from the very beginning—this was not something that gradually happened by accident while the Party leaders were distracted by other things. Giáp attempts to make the enormous power of the land reform apparatus appear to have been an unintended and unforeseen development.

The speech's characterization of the Party's policies for the land reform is also open to question:

> If we look deeply into the thinking of the command [of those carrying out the land reform] and carry out a critical appraisal, we still see weaknesses. Because of those weaknesses, there were a number of policies that were not clear, that were not complete enough, that were lacking in some respect [có thiếu sót]. Some examples are the policy of making allowances for landlord families that had contributed to the revolution, landlord families who had children fight in the army or work as revolutionary cadres or bureaucrats. With respect to our policy for revolutionary landlords, we did not establish concreate regulations. Our policy "combine land reform with the basic smashing of reactionary organizations" was not correct.

An alternative view from the one presented by Giáp might argue that it was the remarkable precision and specificity of the land reform policies in a few key areas that contributed most to the violence. There was nothing vague about the Party leadership's use of quotas and ratios to determine how many landlords cadres were supposed to find in their respective communities. Indeed, where the Party leaders were vague was in the areas that could have been used by people or cadres to prove definitively that a person should not be considered a "landlord." The most important of these vague areas was the amount of acreage to be used to determine who qualified as a landlord. As we saw in chapter five, at the March 1955 7th Plenum of the Central Committee, when some members of that body had expressed concerns about the violence and

injustice of the campaign, the question of changing the method of class demarcation to one based on acreage had been raised. The Party leaders addressed this proposition as follows:

> There are comrades who request that we expand the possibility of donating land to all who are not cruel and despotic [landlords], but we cannot carry out land reform peacefully. Why not?
>
> There are comrades who request that we reconsider the standards for determining who belongs to the landlord class. They request that we only call people landlords if they own over a certain amount of land. This is an important issue [vấn đề lớn]…[466]

As noted in chapter five, the editors of the *Party Documents* series had excised the part after "important issue" where an explanation was given for why the landlords could not be determined on the basis of landholdings. Perhaps some day, a researcher will come across an original unedited version of this document in the archives. My guess is that the general thrust of the excised section will be that feudal exploitation is primarily a way of doing business and is not necessarily determined by how much land a person owns or rents out—an explanation put forward many times before. But there may also have been some statement whose general thrust was the idea that the regime's "enemies" could use a concrete acreage demarcation law to deprive the peasants of struggle targets in the campaign, and that the land reform campaign could not work if peasants in every community did not have targets for struggle.

It is also clear from the first paragraph of the passage above that some Central Committee members had hoped to expand the possibility of donating land (for those landlords not labeled as "cruel and despotic") as a means of avoiding violence. But this had been rejected by the Party leaders, who felt violence was required for the peasants to achieve the desired "awakening" to their new power. As noted, in his January 1955 speech on the land reform to people of Hà Nội, Politburo member Hoàng Quốc Việt had played up the possibility of donating land for landowners in Hà Nội, making it appear to be a mere bureaucratic formality, with the exception of the crucial final qualification that a person's right to donate land would have to be approved by local peasants.

Khrushchev's account of Stalin's crimes at 20th CPSU Congress raised questions among Communists, fellow travelers, and people in general about Marxist-Leninist ideology and whether it explained the phenomena of Stalinism to some extent. In his speech, Khrushchev had depicted Stalin's actions as a deviation from Lenin's teachings. Võ Nguyên Giáp, in his October 29 speech, engaged in a similar mode of argument, exonerating Marxism-Leninism of responsibility for the land reform's violence. The "errors" of the land reform, Giáp argued, were "violations of the Party's policies, violations of the principles and regulations of a party that follows Marxism-Leninism, and violations of the legal regime of a democratic republican state." But Giáp provided no political mechanism for assuring that such "violations" would not occur again. In keeping with their Marxist-Leninist ideology, the DRV leaders saw their legal system as a tool to be used by the vanguard Party in the same way that they believed the legal systems of Western democracies were created to serve the bourgeoisie. As such, the Party leaders saw themselves as having complete freedom to organize the legal system in the way they thought best served the interests of the working class (as determined by the Communist Party). People could only hope, then, that the Party's system of "criticism and self-criticism" would protect them. Did

[466] The ellipsis was in the original text from VKD, indicating that a part of the original document may have been cut out by the editors of the series.

Giáp's speech, a type of self-criticism, suggest that this method would be a reliable way to guarantee the rights of citizens of the DRV?

Part Five: Actions Taken by the Party Leaders after having "Discovered" the "Errors"

After having covered the Party's policies, pointed out the basic success of the land reform, described some of the "errors" of the campaign, and analyzed their origins, Võ Nguyên Giáp turned to the measures that the Party leaders would take to address the "mistakes" of the campaign:

> Since the beginning of April of this year, when the Politburo began to discover the mistakes, it released a directive for carrying out the first step of correction.
>
> Chairman Hồ, on behalf of the Party and Government, sent a letter to compatriots in the countryside, stating for them to be absolutely clear on the fact that Party Central Committee and Government had carried out a strict and sober appraisal of the mistakes and weaknesses. A planned was formed to resolutely correct [the errors] with an eye toward unifying cadres, unifying the people, stabilizing the countryside, and pushing forward production.

The rest of Giáp's section on the land reform dealt with the specifics of the Party's planned "correction of errors" campaign.

The speech's shorter second section moved away from a discussion of the land reform and toward a more general discussion of the path forward and the nature of the DRV regime. In their discourse over the past three decades, the various Party leaders had always made liberal use of the term "democratic." They well understand the positive valence that this word had in the minds of many Vietnamese. Depending on the person, it could conjure up notions of modernity, freedom, social justice, economic development, and progress more generally.

The Party leaders, after taking power in 1945, had, generally speaking, preferred to leave democracy undefined, allowing people to imagine it to mean what they desired it to. In the aftermath of the land reform, some DRV intellectuals argued that features of Western or "bourgeois" democracies—their stress on the separation of power, an independent judiciary, a free press, and the notion of democratic freedoms guaranteed by the law—would likely have prevented the type of violence that had happened during the land reform. These disgruntled DRV intellectuals, who formed what would be come know as the "Nhân văn-Giai phẩm" movement, put the concept of democracy on the agenda. They wanted a public discussion of what democracy actually meant.

Võ Nguyên Giáp addressed this question in the latter part of his speech:

> The regime of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam is a democratic people's dictatorship, which means the following: it is democratic with the people (which comprises the four revolutionary classes: the workers, peasants, peti-bourgeoisie, and the people's bourgeoisie along with democratic and patriotic notables) and a dictatorship with the enemies of the people. That regime finds its support in the unified bloc of the entire people which has as its basis the worker-peasant alliance led by the working class.
>
> Our regime is a democratic regime. Our government is the government of the people. It works on behalf of the people and receives the people's support. We have overthrow imperialism and we have overthrown the feudal landlord class. Our democratic regime is built on the victory of the anti-imperial and anti-feudal revolutions in the North. Our campatriots

> here in the North live in freedom and independence. From a position as slaves of the imperialists and feudalists they have stepped upward to the position of owners of the country, from a position of being occupied, they have stepped upward to hold political power.

The Ngô Đình Diệm regime, on the other hand, Giáp explained, was "against the people" [phản dân] and did not serve their interests. It was still under the "ruling yoke" of the American imperialists. "The regime in the South is the regime of the most stubborn and reactionary pro-American elements of the landlord and comprodore bourgeoisie classes." According to Giáp, "under a regime such as that, one cannot speak of democracy, and there can only be "freedom" for a tiny group of people in the leading faction so that they can fight against the people, fight against the Fatherland." It bears mention that this was essentially the same line of argument that the RVN leadership used in their descriptions of the DRV.

Simply because the RVN regime in the South was not democratic and the DRV in the North was against that regime, though, did not necessarily mean that there was democracy in the North. And Giáp still needed to explain what the "dictatorship" part of the term "people's democratic dictatorship" actually meant.

> Our regime is a people democratic dictatorship. It is democratic with the people and with the vast majority of our compatriots. It is a dictatorship with enemies of the people, with the small number of lackies of the enemy, and with all counterrevolutionary activities committed by either internal or external enemies.

At the 10th Plenum of the Central Committee, drawing inspiration in part from the CPSU 20th Congress and Mao Zedong's "100 Flowers" movement, the Central Committee's resolution stated that "democracy would be expanded." What did this mean for life in the DRV? Võ Nguyên Giáp explained:

> The 10th Plenum has put forward the policy of expanding democracy, of guaranteeing democratic freedoms. That is a very correct policy and one that has the support of the people. *But the problem is that there must be a correct understanding of the right to democratic freedoms and how to use them correctly.* Recently, in the light of the CPSU 20th Congress, the Party and the Government have paid attention to expanding democracy. From the village hamlets to the urban centers, people are allowed to express their opinions, speak of their aspirations, and criticize the weaknesses or mistakes that remain in the work of the Party and Government. Within the Party and among the people, in offices, in factories, in schools, during meetings in rural and urban neighborhoods, during meetings of intellectuals, we see a new vitality. It is open, it is democratic, and it allows for the discovery of mistakes so that they can be fixed. The criticism is done in a creative and constructive way. The press has also begun to fix its formulaic style and its tendency to report only the positive and say nothing of the negative, to write only about successes and not about difficulties and weaknesses so that the people understand clearly. And the press has begun to reflect the truth more, even if not yet enough. […] That is the positive aspect, the basic aspect of the issue of expanding democracy, and we must develop it so that it is secure [vững chắc].

But, according to Giáp, there could be a negative aspect of democracy that had the potential to be harmful.

> However, next to those positive things, we need to recognize that while we expand democracy, we must take precautions against negative manifestations [of democracy]. Within our organization, we need to take precautions against an expansion of democracy not being accompanied by a consciousness of the need for increased centralization and increase in organizational mentality [tổ chức tính] among workers. In offices or in schools, we need to be careful about an expansion of democracy not being accompanied by a strengthening of work and study discipline. In our press, we need to be careful of criticism that is not constructive, using the need to speak the truth as a justification for not speaking the truth, using the need to criticize weaknesses as a justification for exaggerating those mistakes, sowing suspicion.
>
> […]
>
> We need to be careful about, and struggle resolutely against, deviationist tendencies that arise in the expansion of democracy or in the way that democratic freedoms are used. We need to be even more vigilant against the schemes of the enemy to exploit our expansion of democracy or people's democratic freedoms, exploiting the difficulties that we face in order to take actions against the people, in order to resist our regime.

Conclusion

The upshot of Giáp's speech could be summarized as follows. Many bad things had happened during the land reform, but they were not what the Party leaders, who had constructed and led the campaign, had intended to happen. As bad as those things were, though, they did not call for any significant soulsearching about the regime's ideology, governmental structure, general political culture, or relationship with the PRC. The "democratic people's dictatorship" that produced the land reform would continue on much as before. Indeed, the fact that the Central Committee had "discovered" the "errors" and engaged in "serious criticism" was touted as a reassuring affirmation of the regime's basic goodness.

Inspired by the Soviet Union's 20th Congress and also in response to the needs of the North Vietnamese people, the Party Central Committee had agreed to promote a policy of "expanding democracy." This had no institutional component such as giving the people the right to vote for their legislators, creating a check on the power of the ruling VWP, or developing political mechanisms that would enable the people of the DRV to have a say in major policy questions such as whether to abolish the principle of private property in the countryside and move to collectivized agriculture. "Expanding democracy" meant that the inferiors would be allowed to criticize their superiors—for a while, until this was no longer the taste of the Party leaders.

Nguyễn Tất Thành, Võ Nguyên Giáp, and other top Party leaders would continue in the coming years to maintain that the land reform, on a basic level, had been a success, despite the alleged "errors" committed by cadres and leaders within the land reform apparatus. From the point of view of rural peasants, what had been successful about the campaign? The idea that the campaign finally enabled poor peasants to fulfill their dream of owning land holds little weight since only two years later, in 1958, the DRV began the process of agricultural collectivization, which was completed in 1960. In addition to being limited by brevity, the potential joy of land ownership for poor peasants was also dampened significantly by the heavy tax burden imposed by the DRV state. Ultimately, the land reform involved no outside injection of wealth and resources into local communities. It was only a redistribution of what was already there.

From the point of view of the Party leaders, what had the campaign accomplished? First, Nguyễn Tất Thành's decision to embark upon land reform in October of 1952 had probably been crucial to shoring up support from Stalin and Mao in the war against the French Union forces. Particularly in the case of China, the VWP's adoption of the CCP model of land reform meant that Chinese prestige was tied even more closely to the success of the DRV. Second, the land reform seems to have been a success for the VWP leaders in that it paved the way for a relatively smooth transition to agricultural collectivization. Many peasants in the Soviet Union had fiercely resisted this transformation. This does not appear to have been the case in the DRV.

Agricultural collectivization would prove to be disastrous from an economic perspective, with the DRV unable to guarantee its own food security. But as a tool for facilitating the mobilization of people for war, the collectivized agricultural system has to be considered an incredible success. During the war against the French, the DRV leaders had grown tired of having to ask (or demand) of peasants that they contribute their rice to the war effort. With agricultural collectivization, that dynamic was reversed, with peasants now having to ask the state for rice. Such a system, while not without its loopholes, gave the DRV regime enormous leverage over the rural population.

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Công an mới
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Dân quốc
Độc lập
Giai phẩm
Nhân dân
Nhân văn
Quân đội nhân dân
Sinh hoạt nội bộ
Sinh hoạt văn nghệ
Sông Hồng
Sông hương
Sự thật

Tạp chí học tập
Thanh nghị
Thống nhất
Tìa sáng
Tiên phong
Tổ quốc
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