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

Though the “independence” enjoyed by the State of Vietnam (as it is usually called) was limited, Nguyễn Tất Thành and the Politburo took seriously the threat that this noncommunist alternative posed to their regime. By the beginning of 1949, they had begun to establish “denunciation” (tố cáo) as a feature of DRV political culture. In the summer of 1948, the responsibility for uncovering traitors had been confined to members of the DRV state. In January of 1949, the Politburo ordered local cadres to “make clear to the people the responsibility of counterespionage” and to “praise members of the population or of the apparatus who discover nests of spies.” The Politburo also called for more efforts to propagandize anti-spy cases “as an example” for the people and to “develop [in them] both a consciousness of and sense of responsibility for counterespionage work.”
From a professional perspective, the party leaders called on Public Security offices to “train a number of their professional cadres for the task of interrogating suspects” and to “send a number of Public Security and intelligence workers overseas for study.” In addition to these measures, security cadres were to train local militia members how to “ask for papers” from people. And finally, the party leaders called upon the security apparatus “to make for the whole country a traitor list, organized by severity of crime, so that these people could be monitored closely.”

The “Buy Rice for Hồ Chí Minh” Campaign

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

From the Central Committee to Inter-Zone Party Branches:

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

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

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

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

The three-page directive provided detailed instructions about how the Hồ Chí Minh letter was to be used. First, party members at the zone level were to print the letter in an “artistic manner” and send a copy to every “inter-subdistrict”
party branch and, ideally, to every village. Attached to the directive was a simple design for the creation of a rice-sale signup sheet. This was to be posted in some prominent place in a village.

This having been completed, the party leaders hoped, but probably did not expect, that many people with spare rice would, of their own volition, sign the register. After the push for “donative rice sales” had been made, the directive explained, cadres should tally and publicize the donations for each subdistrict, district, and province to create a friendly competition—the “patriotic emulation.”

With respect to rewards, the directive explained: “After you have received the [rice-donation registration] forms, you should print out a number of certificates of praise from Mr. [Hồ] to give as rewards.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Thành’s Meeting with Stalin and Mao in Moscow

After learning that the PRC would recognize the DRV, Thành prepared for a prompt journey to Beijing (and hopefully to Moscow). This involved a seventeen-day journey across the Vietnamese North zone to the Chinese border, where he met with CCP representatives who transported him to Beijing.

No doubt news of his trip to Beijing was leaked to Central Committee members who were convening near the party headquarters for their standard beginning-of-year meeting. One can imagine the delight with which comrades at the meeting received a letter from Thành, who explained his exciting absence with droll, ironic humor: “Comrades, I regret that, because I am a little tired, I cannot meet with you at this All-Nation Party meeting.” Thành arrived in Beijing on January 30, 1950, spent two days in the PRC capital, and left for Moscow on February 2. After taking off from Beijing, his aircraft flew almost directly north over Mongolia to the Russian city of Chita, which lay on the Trans-Siberian Railroad.
A message sent by Thành to Stalin during this stop on the journey suggests that the DRV leader had been worrying about the “optics” of his Moscow visit. His professed reason for asking that his visit be kept a secret was concern that the French might “undertake political and military actions.”17 It is unlikely that Thành was worried about whether party leaders back home—Trưởng Chinh, Phạm Văn Đồng, Võ Nguyên Giáp, and others—could be trusted to handle any situation that arose. (Recall Thành’s 140-day trip to France during 1946.) Thành’s real concern, I believe, was the potential damage to his prestige that apathetic and disrespectful treatment from Stalin could cause among Vietnamese.

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

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

The General Mobilization Decree: The Totalitarian Push, February 1950

In Thánh’s absence, the party Central Committee held its yearly January meeting. The “main focus” would be the “mobilization effort to shift toward the general counter-offensive” in the war against the French and their Vietnamese
allies, the State of Vietnam. Among the roughly two hundred pages of reports that Trường Chinh, Võ Nguyên Giáp, Hoàng Quốc Việt, and Phạm Văn Đồng read at the meeting, one of the most significant sections appears roughly midway through Chinh’s opening report. The section is titled “The General Mobilization of Human, Material, and Intellectual Resources for Victory.” Chinh began by stating that shifting to a “general counter-offensive” was going to require a “general mobilization.” Up to that point, the party had “tended toward the use of inspiration and persuasion in matters of mobilization and had been light on the use of compulsion.” The method of mobilizing people through “patriotic emulation movements” now needed to be supplemented by the creation of a “general mobilization law.” As Chinh explained:

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

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

Our regime has been too soft. 20

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

There is still a great deal of potential in the people, but up to now, a large part of that potential has not been dredged out, has not yet been tapped. During this period of intense struggle, we must announce that the people’s labor, property, tools, and materials are the Government’s to use. The Government has complete power to use [these things] to the benefit of the resistance struggle. Whoever has goods must give goods. Whoever has labor must give labor. Whoever has intellect must give his intellect.
Nobody may stand outside the people’s resistance struggle. Everybody must serve the Fatherland according to his ability.21

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

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

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

The DRV State as “Special Legal Regime”

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

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

This theoretical introduction amounted in practical terms to the “resolute implementation of a special legal regime” that would make possible the mobilization of “all human, material, and intellectual power.”
Our resistance war is a revolutionary war, a people’s war, but only now, after four years of war, have we decided to [implement this policy]. And it has been too late in coming. If we want to carry out a general counteroffensive, we must implement this special legal regime and maintain a policy of doing whatever is needed to guarantee the complete and prompt implementation of policies.24

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

Famine, Land Policy, and Party Impurity

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

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

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

1. The French enemy have cut our supply roads, destroyed the harvest, burned rice, killed buffalos and cattle, etc. in those regions where they have carried out sweeps. They have also occupied parts of the delta that are densely populated and have a lot of rice.

2. Because of the war, some land has been left uncultivated. There is also a shortage of farm labor while the number of people whose jobs do not involve participating in production (such as the army, bureaucrats, cadres, etc.) has risen.

3. When the Government collects government salary tax [from the peasants], buys fixed-price rice, and collects tax in rice at 6%, the gang of hoarder-speculators hide their rice and then sell it to the people.

4. Recently, the weather has not been suitable for farming, lowering the productivity of grains.

5. Additionally, the amount of DRV money printed has been greater than the number of products sold on the domestic market, impacting to some extent the cost of living and especially the price of rice.26

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

Along with their military aid, the PRC began providing food aid to the DRV. This reflected a reality that would haunt Vietnam’s Communist leaders for the next thirty-seven years. They ruled an overwhelmingly agricultural population and yet desperately needed free food grown by the farmers of other nations. War
played an important role in this, but the food crises of the early 1980s would show that critically low agricultural productivity was simply a feature of their regime. According to the scholar Qiang Zhai, the Chinese shipped 2,800 tons of food to the DRV from April to September of 1950. This was enough to feed, over a six-month period, roughly 30,000 people or the equivalent of two military divisions. It appears, however, that this aid did little to stem the growing problem of agricultural production and hunger.28

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

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

**Land Policy**

The appearance of famine in several provinces surrounding the party headquarters of the Vietnamese North zone stimulated new discussion of rural policies. Why had they not produced better results? For example, why had the “land donation” campaign not raised production? In March 1950, Chinh recycled the same explanations that he had used to explain the poor results of other policies:
Local cadres had “not yet explained [the policy] thoroughly”; the mobilization was “still scattered”; cadres “lacked a continuous plan”; and they carried out the mobilization “in the wrong direction.”

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

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

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

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

The task of temporary distribution of land has been carried out slowly and carelessly. . . . When implementing the temporary land distributions, [cadres] at the local level have had many shortcomings. There are places where [local cadres] do not explain clearly to tenant farmers about the Party’s policy with respect to living on temporarily distributed land, resulting sometimes in peasants abandoning the land and leaving (as was the case in Tuyên Quang). There are places where, after land has been distributed, tenant farmers send hundreds of letters of complaint to the provincial, zone, and even to the Central Committee level. They do this because temporary land
distribution cadres do not have a spirit of impartiality (công tâm) and do not pay attention to the ideas of the poor (Bắc Giang). There are places where [local cadres] only distribute one part of the land, using the other part to create a farm (trại nông). This sometimes involves forcing peasants who received temporarily distributed land to pool their land together into a cooperative, inspiring resentment among these peasants.  

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

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

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

**Party Impurity**

The narrative of party impurity also seems to have reached a turning point in January 1950. In explanations of poor cadre performance, class and espionage began to replace Thành’s eight common party-member “diseases” listed in his 1947 book, *The Way of Working*. Trường Chinh stated that the party now had 450,000 members. Even accounting for some exaggeration, this was
an amazing increase from the days of the August Revolution when the party probably had about 5,000 members. According to Chinh, the low percentage of “worker-peasants” in the party—supposedly only 8.7 percent—helped to explain current problems:

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

This improper development has also led, in a few places, to spies slipping into the Party to sabotage us from within.\(^{38}\)

Fellow Politburo member Hoàng Quốc Việt made the same claim:

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

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

The complaints leveled by Chinh and Quốc Việt paint a picture of the DRV countryside as a place in chaos. According to them, local cadres were “giving orders,” “using state power,” and even “using government decrees to threaten” rather than focusing on “mobilizing, explaining, and persuading.” The reason for these and many other “mistakes,” according to Chinh, was that lower-level
party members “have little concern for the party’s policy of unifying the entire
people to carry out the protracted resistance war,” “do not understand clearly
the Party’s revolutionary strategy,” “do not aim at the main goal of developing
production,” and “do not have a solid grasp of the mass perspective.” Assessing
this general situation, Chinh claimed:

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

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

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

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

Đông Khê was the middle of three important French forts on the northern
third of Route 4. About forty kilometers to the north of Đông Khê was the
major French fort at Cao Bằng. About twenty-five kilometers to the south of
the middle fort was a smaller one at a town called Thất Khê. Chen and Thành planned to attack Đông Khê and wait to see how the French responded. This was the plan for the legendary “Border Campaign” (sometimes called the “Battle of Cao Bằng”) that would change the complexion of the war.42

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

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

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

Chen Geng decided that the DRV attack on Đông Khê would begin on September 16, 1950.47 As it turned out, this was also the day when Carpentier released his Special Order Number 46 calling for the abandonment of Cao Bằng and Đông Khê.48 What Chen Geng and Võ Nguyên Giáp had not expected was the French command’s blase response to the threat posed by the fall of Đông Khê. Carpentier assumed that the fort could be retaken from the DRV with relative ease by a single French battalion (1,300 troops) heading north from Thất
Khê, the southernmost of the three forts. On this assumption, Carpentier decided to continue with the evacuation of Cao Bằng.49

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

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

The French Aftermath of the Border Campaign

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

Chen Geng, Thành, Giáp, Trường Chinh, Phạm Văn Đồng, and Luo Guibo (the lead Chinese advisor) must have been amazed to see the French execute a panicked evacuation of Lạng Sơn on October 18. This major town at the midway point of Route 4 (well south of the three forts) was guarded by five
French battalions (roughly 10,000 troops). DRV forces were not near enough to Lạng Sơn to pose a significant threat. Yet the French commander at the fort, infected like many others with a feeling of paranoia about the imagined power of the DRV forces in the area, called for the abandonment of the city. A few days later, when the DRV forces were finally able to reach this prize, which had been handed to them for free, they were able to take advantage of the garrison’s enormous store of weapons, supplies, and food. The French had been in such a hurry to leave Lạng Sơn that they had decided to destroy their supplies by means of air bombardment, which proved ineffective.54

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

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

In my opinion, this crisis of morale on the French side combined with the immense economic difficulties on the DRV side left the party leaders with no real choice but to take a calculated risk. In these unusual circumstances, a furious military push toward Hanoi might lead the panicking French to abandon the city and perhaps concede northern Vietnam to the DRV. If the push were successful, it would retrospectively be called the “general counteroffensive.” If not, it would merely be another important battle.
Had the French kept General Latour as the commandant for another couple of weeks, the DRV might have succeeded in their plan to push the reeling French into abandoning Hanoi. But that seems to have been staved off (barely) through a combination of luck and the remarkable efforts of the charismatic new French Commander-in-Chief, General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny. The French government had named him to the position on December 6, 1950; he arrived in Hanoi on the 19th.

*The Battle of Vĩnh Yên: January 13-17, 1951*

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

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

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