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CHAPTER 5

Military Stalemate and Rice-Field Decline: 1951–1952

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

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

Meanwhile, the economic struggles of the DRV continued to worsen. Talk of the need for an “inspection” of the countryside persisted. The official discourse about party impurity as an explanation for declining agricultural productivity continued to build. Perhaps inspired by their recently arrived Chinese Communist advisers, in 1951, the DRV leaders introduced a new method of taxation: the “agricultural tax” (thuế nông nghiệp). Also, in 1951, “thought reform” (chính huấn), a policy promoted by Chinese advisers, became an official DRV policy.
The Second Party Congress: February 11–19, 1951

The party’s Second Congress was held in February in the province of Tuyên Quang, about 200 kilometers north of Hanoi. The party leaders had been hoping to hold a congress since back in August 1948. But how could Nguyễn Tất Thành have held a party congress without official diplomatic recognition from the USSR and without the participation of representatives from the Communist bloc?

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

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

And seventh, the Second Party Congress marked a turning point for the “Hồ Chí Minh personality cult.” Since taking power in 1945, Thành had generally promoted “Hồ Chí Minh” as a folksy and courageous patriot who might have been vaguely connected to communism but who was, more or less, above
domestic politics. Now, with the party’s official establishment and its decision to operate openly, Thành, with help from his lieutenants, had to adjust the character “Hồ Chí Minh” so that he was closer in form to the leaders of the other “People’s Democracies.”

The Fight for Control of Villages in the Tonkin Delta

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

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

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

In French-controlled areas, agricultural goods could be sold at market price
for piastres, a valuable and internationally recognized currency. The desire of peasants to sell their rice to the French troubled the DRV’s leaders. As a party resolution from Zone 3 noted:

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

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

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

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

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

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

As mentioned earlier, the DRV leadership’s methods of consolidating its power in villages, especially those whose loyalty was in doubt, usually combined vigorous propaganda with “anti-traitor” measures that frequently involved the
The elimination of traitors and the liquidation of puppet officials [trừ gian diệt té] must be done with determination except in those places where the movement is weak, forcing us to leave some form of the puppet administration intact. Where the movement is reasonably strong, the masses should be mobilized to carry out [the elimination of traitors and the liquidation of the puppet administration].

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

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

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

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

In de Lattre’s mind, a precondition for the investment of Thanh Hóa province was the establishment of French control in the large, sparsely populated province to its north, Hòa Bình. This province to the southwest of Hanoi was
an important transportation hub for the DRV forces. It connected sectors in the northern part of the country with those in Laos and Central Vietnam. The rough mountainous terrain of Hòa Bình and its distance from Hanoi made it a battlefield that played to the strengths of the DRV forces.

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

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

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

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

Đồng explained that the enemy’s plan to occupy Hòa Bình would “naturally create many difficulties” for the DRV forces in their transportation from the Vietnamese North region to more southerly regions. The French move would also create difficulties for the DRV on the military, economic, and political fronts. “Faced with that situation, a few people and a few of our cadres have shown
themselves to be perplexed and worried because they have yet to recognize clearly
the fierce nature of this period of our resistance war’s second stage.”

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

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

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

Though the losses at the nearer post were heavy, Giáp remained determined
to destroy the much more heavily defended post of Xóm Pheo, just two kilome-
ters to the west of the smaller post. This meant amassing four battalions for the
attack (6,000 to 8,000 men). The post at Xóm Pheo was defended by a battalion
of the French Foreign Legion whose members had had time to construct a well-thought-out defense structure. With four heavily armed strongpoints strategically placed around the base, the Foreign Legion battalion was well prepared.

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

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

The Agricultural Tax

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

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

Clause 1:

In order to guarantee adequate supply for the resistance war, to develop agricultural production, to unify and simplify for the people their [tax]
contribution, and to make the people’s tax contribution fair, from this 1951 harvest tax onward, [the Government shall]:

1. Abolish agricultural contributions to the National budget and to local funds such as: land tax, rice for government employees, [rice for] people’s literacy classes, rice for supporting local militias, rice for the subdistrict fund, rice for road construction . . .


3. Establish an agricultural tax that is collected in rice, the quantity of which will be calculated according to a piece of land’s harvest in normal years.

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

Clause 2:
The regulation for setting the agricultural tax will be set in a subsequent decree.

Clause 3:
While waiting for the promulgation of this regulation, the Government will borrow some rice from the people during the 1951 May harvest to help the national Budget. The amount of rice borrowed will then be deducted from the forthcoming agricultural tax. If the amount borrowed exceeds the tax level, the Government will return the difference. If the amount is less than the tax level, then the people will have to submit the difference. In addition to the amount of tax borrowed for the National Budget, the Government will borrow for Local Budget a quantity of rice not to exceed 20% of the rice borrowed for the National Budget.

Signed
Hồ Chí Minh

Thus the DRV’s agricultural tax involved assigning households an estimated yield based on land ownership. From that estimated yield, the government would take a set percentage of the harvest. In theory, this agricultural tax was supposed to motivate households to produce more. Because the tax burden was based on the government’s yield estimate, a family that outproduced the estimate would pay a smaller percentage of the harvest to the state and keep for themselves a larger total quantity of rice. The family that produced less than the government
estimate would be punished by having to hand over a greater percentage of their harvest and keep for themselves a smaller total quantity of rice. Obviously, the party leaders hoped that this carrot-and-stick approach would motivate peasants to produce more.

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

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

With respect to the “capable cadres” sent to “slow” or “difficult” communities, it is likely that the infamous visiting cadre in the writer Võ Văn Trúc’s historical novel, *A Village Story Back Then*, provides an accurate example. Trúc wrote about his own village’s experience of tax collection in the province of Nghệ An during 1952. As Trúc’s account shows, a local cadre who needed to have a “capable cadre” sent to “help” him collect the agricultural tax could be in serious trouble. (In the story, the visiting cadre tosses the local party leader in jail under brutal conditions.)

In March, Thành decided to mobilize another “production and economization movement,” which focused on encouraging peasants to devise a “production and economization plan.” This was needed to ensure that the resistance war could be carried out “for a long time.”
In order to implement a production and economization plan, we need to create a deep and enduring mass movement. We need to propagandize, mobilize, organize, and lead the people to enthusiastically participate in the work of establishing a plan and implementing it. We must make the production and economization movement the central focus of the patriotic emulation movement. Every locality, every unit, every family should all sign a contract to compete with each other in implementing their own production and economization plan as a means of completing the general plan of the Government.23

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

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

“Thought Reform” and the Party Purge

With the arrival of Chinese advisors to the DRV’s party headquarters came pressure to adopt Maoist revolutionary policies. One of the earliest and most important of those was “thought reform” (chính huấn), sometimes referred to as “rectification” in Western scholarship. “Thought reform” began in the summer of 1951 and was initially a method of ideological instruction used in the military.
In that milieu, the purpose was to improve the fighting capacity of soldiers. A “thought reform” guidebook written in the summer of 1951 explains that, for the purpose of “cadres” (i.e., officers), the reform aimed to “raise the organizational and command capacity.” With this military element came a political one aimed at “strengthening a cadre’s understanding of world events (thờ sự), improving organizational discipline, and instilling a spirit of independent and zealous action when working.” For regular soldiers, the program had a practical and ideological component. The first focused on improving soldiers’ knowledge of how to use weapons. The second, “political” component, aimed at “strengthening [soldiers’] correct understanding of the democratic regime in the military” and “improving each person’s consciousness and zealous spirit.”

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

As was typical of the discourse of the party leaders, the justification for the purge focused on a list of “mistakes” that officials and party members had committed to the alleged detriment of the “correct” policies of the party leaders. “Because they lack a firm political view and class perspective, many cadres and party members have lacked a spirit of absolute and unyielding struggle for the revolutionary cause.” Other sins included “inability to distinguish between the enemy, friends, and us;” “being distant from the masses;” “being distant from reality;” “suffering from the disease of corruption and waste;” and having an “unclear conception of democracy and discipline in the Party.” Lương then described some of the difficulties that lay ahead for the DRV, especially having to fight a protracted
war. “If our Party . . . does not eliminate the above mistakes and weaknesses in the thinking of cadres and party members, implementation of the Party and Government’s policies in the coming period will meet many obstructions.”

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

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

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

As was the case in China, “thought reform” involved pushing individuals to confess to various instances of petit-bourgeois thinking. The point was to confess to some sort of crime, thereby affirming the party leadership’s picture of DRV-controlled areas as full of potential traitors and saboteurs. After the “thought reform” session, each student had to write down a self-confession, which would then be placed in the person’s file. For the party leaders, having the self-confessions of rank-and-file party members generated leverage over them. In his history of the First Indochina War, Goscha mentions an example of a “thought reform” program that dealt with 4,000 cadres. Every single participant ultimately confessed to either having “worked for the enemy” or having had “past relations with him.”

The DRV intellectual Vũ Thư Hiến remembered “thought reform” as a “sorcerer’s spell . . . that paralyzed a person’s sense of perception, creating a laziness of thought to the highest degree, removing all ability to resist, turning a person into a Party robot who knows only loyalty to the Party.”
The CCP Advisor Luo Guibo’s Preliminary Land Reform Program

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

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

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

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

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

Trouble with the 1952 October Rice Harvest Tax Collection

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

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

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

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

Only a few sentences after stating that adjusting the yield levels (upward) was going to bring the peasants “peace of mind,” Chinh candidly acknowledged that this task would be “difficult” and that cadres would need to “endure hardships” in convincing peasants to raise their yield levels. “Cadres must propagandize and explain thoroughly so that the peasants understand; they must also mobilize the masses to participate in democratic discussion.” After the yield levels had been adjusted upward, cadres were to create “tax books” based on that new level and collect the amount in the book.
During the 1952 October harvest, one interesting new twist that was certain to make tax collection more difficult was the Politburo’s decision to collect money as well as rice. The collection of money was not a substitute for the collection of rice—it was an extra tax added to the agricultural tax. The DRV leaders were determined to “balance their budget” and raise the value of their badly inflated currency. By requiring that peasants pay an additional tax in DRV dollars, the government could reduce the supply of this currency and hopefully bring its value back up.

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

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

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

Chinh provided no explanation for why a tax system theoretically based on set percentages of agricultural yields needed to have collection quotas. Why not simply follow the established rate? To set collection quotas, no matter how closely they were tied to “potential,” gave the operation the smell of a giant rice and money requisition program. In light of this, it is perhaps understandable
why Chinh concluded his directive with “Chairman Hồ’s” words of advice about how cadres should approach the agricultural tax: “The agricultural tax is a campaign. We must concentrate our forces and try to exceed the goal so that we can bring the campaign to victory.”

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

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

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

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

Battle for Nà Sơn: Autumn 1952

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

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

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

Over the next three weeks, the French focus turned to the second of these two garrisons, Nà Sơn. There, they decided to create an “entrenched camp” that would seem weak enough and isolated enough to tempt the DRV command to attack but which would be constructed and armed well enough to repel a large force. The French would need four or five weeks to create such a camp. With DRV divisions only days away, Nà Sơn could come under attack before the preparations were complete. To avoid such an eventuality, the French command created an elaborate diversionary campaign, which successfully kept DRV troops away while construction of the “entrenched camp” at Nà Sơn proceeded.44
From late October through to late November 1952, the French forces worked feverishly to ready Nà Sản for the coming attack. Most of the material was flown into the base on DC-3 cargo planes. During daylight hours, the base’s airstrip received a new load roughly every six minutes. By November 23, Nà Sản had about 12,000 troops. Over the preceding weeks, the base had been supplied with 11,000 tons of barbed wire and 5,000 mines along with heavy artillery pieces, vehicles, tools, engines, etc. French soldiers at the base cut down most of the trees on the nearby hillocks and created ten defensive strongpoints. Surrounded as they were by DRV divisions, the French troops at Nà Sản well understood that their lifeline was the airstrip—it needed to be defended at all costs. The DRV leaders do not appear to have appreciated fully the measures taken by the French command to fortify Nà Sản. Toward the end of November, after a few days of DRV attacks on French posts at the very outer edges of the entrenched camp, Võ Nguyên Giáp moved troops in place for an attack on two key hillocks overlooking the base. If these could be taken, the DRV troops would then have a direct line of fire at the airstrip and a good chance of cutting the base off from its primary means of supply. In such a scenario, the French forces could be compelled to retreat along Route 6 where the DRV forces had prepared to carry out lethal ambushes.

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

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

For the next three nights, Giáp threw his troops at Nà Sản, with fighting always taking place at night under the light of flairs dropped by circling airplanes. But the “entrenched camp” held against the onslaught, inflicting terrible losses
on the DRV troops. On December 3, Giáp called off the attack and began preparations to withdraw his three divisions. To be able to overthrow a garrison such as Nà Sản, the DRV troops needed heavy artillery, something they did not have at the time. Roughly a year later, though, the French would construct another “entrenched camp” deep in DRV territory with the intention of again tempting the party leaders into another costly attack. But this time, in the valley of Điện Biên Phủ, the DRV forces would have the heavy artillery they needed. And the outcome would be different.