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By 1953, as Nguyễn Tất Thành (Hồ Chí Minh) and his lieutenants in the Politburo were moving forward with land reform, the food situation in many DRV-controlled areas was either on the brink of, or heading steadily toward, disaster. The lack of food stemmed partly from the economic dislocations of war, partly from the French bombing of dikes, partly from the enormous amount of rice required to feed the growing DRV state and military, and partly from the party’s counterproductive policies. Generally, when governments want less of something in society, they tax that thing more. For the DRV leaders, they needed to tax agriculture more and also have more of it.

From the perspective of the Politburo, one challenge of the land reform was that the extraordinary conditions of war undermined two of the campaign’s most important ideological justifications. The first was that the “feudal landlord class” bore the greatest responsibility for the current difficulties of peasants in DRV-controlled areas. Whatever challenges rural elites had posed to the rural poor in the past, evidence suggests that these had been surpassed by those generated by the DRV state and the realities of war. A second land-reform justification held that the rural poor were driven by land hunger. Had the tax demands of the DRV state been less onerous, most peasants, driven by hunger itself and by the prestige that came with land ownership, would have been eager to acquire more land and to produce more food. However, peasants understood that “temporary land distributions” were not the same as land ownership. Recipients of such land could not sell it to earn money. The land continued to belong to the DRV state, which, being responsible for prosecuting a war, had a hunger for rice and labor greater than that of most local elites.

Moreover, the DRV’s agricultural tax was calculated as a percentage of estimated yields determined by the state rather than as a percentage of actual yields determined by the farmer’s abilities and other objective factors such as
weather, soil quality, availability of cheap labor, and so on. In other words, the agricultural tax was an early form of command economy. Understanding that this system was rigged against them, many peasants were reluctant to take on more land for fear of being driven into debt to the government. This was an important factor contributing to the large areas of uncultivated farmland in DRV-controlled regions.

The Party Leaders Address the Spread of Famine

In their explanations for the food crisis, the DRV leaders were desperate to link rural hardships to the enemy—the French, the anticommunist State of Vietnam, or, increasingly, the landlord class—rather than to the exactions imposed upon peasants by the DRV state. So strong was the desire of the party leaders to deflect blame away from the government that they created a propaganda campaign linking the food shortage to locust plagues. There may have been some truth to a locust problem—however, there was no truth to the fantastical claim that the plague had been organized by the French. At a January 1953 meeting of the party Central Committee, Trương Chinh claimed that “Recently, based on zone reports, the enemy has used the incredibly wicked scheme of destroying the harvest through the release of insects.” Later in his report, Chinh instructed Central Committee members that they “must be alert to and take precautions against the enemy’s release of insects to destroy the harvest.” That Chinh would make such an absurd claim to Central Committee members suggests that a significant distance existed between the Politburo and second-tier party leaders.

Famine Report of the Central Committee’s Peasant Mobilization Subcommittee (March, 1953)

The Central Committee’s Peasant Mobilization Subcommittee (the bureaucratic organ that would be turned into the “Central Land Reform Committee” a few months later) produced an important famine report in March of 1953. Although most internal government documents were directed toward offices or ministries, the Peasant Mobilization Subcommittee’s report on famine was simply addressed to “Uncle [Thành or Hổ Chí Minh], the Central Committee Office, Mr. Thần [Trương Chinh], Mr. Tô [Phạm Văn Đông], Mr. Việt [Hoàng Quốc Việt], Mr. Lương [Lê Văn Lương], Mr. Lành [Tô Hữu], and Mr. Thắng [Hồ Việt Thắng].”

The Subcommittee’s report began with a brief survey of the various interzones in Vietnam, noting provinces and regions where the food situation had become critical. For example, in Hà Đông, just south of Hanoi, ten subdistricts
were “short on rice, with only rich peasants and landlords having spare rice to eat; the majority of those who are hungry are forced to survive on crayfish and snails.” Written in the margin next to this section was the comment, “The people are hungry; landlords and rich peasants have extra rice to eat.”

As for the causes of the famine, the Subcommittee stressed a “lack of vigor in implementing the party’s land policies,” “terrible exploitation” by local elites, efforts by the French to “sabotage the harvest,” and “natural disasters, floods, drought, and insects.” These challenges had “reduced productivity in some places by three quarters.” There was no mention of the agricultural tax in this March 1953 document as a factor leading to famine. But the Subcommittee did conclude its assessment with the following statement: “In our opinion, it is very easy for cadres, comrades, and people to have false perceptions, to fall victim to the enemy’s counterpropaganda stating that the famine is primarily a result of the agricultural tax.”

Phạm Văn Đồng’s “Directive on Famine Prevention and Relief” (May 12, 1953).

In May of 1953, a month after the Peasant Mobilization Subcommittee’s famine report, the DRV prime minister, Phạm Văn Đồng, released a six-page directive devoted solely to the issue of famine. It began with an assessment of the scope of the problem: “Over the past two years, in a number of localities, famine has taken on a regular character, and there are places where it has become serious.” Đồng divided the causes of the famine into two categories, “objective” and “subjective.” The former referred to difficulties created by nature and “feudal exploitation.” The latter referred to factors related to the efforts of local DRV leaders.

The regime of feudalist exploitation of the peasants in the countryside has played a not insignificant role in creating famine. In recent years, during the months of March and August, a number of landlords and rich peasants have refused to give loans to peasants or have waited until the local poor were especially needy so that loans could be given at a higher interest rate. There are even those who exploit the people’s difficulties in order to engage in speculation and hoarding. In many locations, although there is famine, there is no lack of rice in the market and the price even declines. This phenomenon proves that the rich and the speculators still have extra rice at the time when people are dying from starvation.3

Though feudal exploitation, enemy attacks, sabotage, and climatic challenges played a “definite role” in the spread of famine, stated Đồng, “we do not throw our hands up in the air in the face of those causes.”
With better attention to the famine’s subjective causes, in other words, those stemming from the shortcomings of local leaders, the objective ones could be overcome. “Experience has shown that, under the correct leadership of the party and the government, in many places, the people have been victorious in the struggle against the enemy and the elements, protecting production.” As for feudal exploitation, Đặng pointed out that local cadres also had in their corner the party’s land policies, the “people’s government,” and the “forces of the masses.” This was “enough strength,” he stressed, to fight against the “illegal exploitation practiced by the landlords.” As Đặng explained:

But the truth is that in many places we have not resisted zealously the enemy’s efforts at sabotage; we have not struggled against the elements or against feudalist exploitation. In the same manner, we have not zealously organized the masses to help each other increase production and economize.

Then, when the famine happens, [local cadres] do not try to fight the famine, to curb it, to prevent it from spreading, to prevent it from becoming critical. Many of our cadres lack a class political standpoint, a mass perspective. They do not care about the lives of the people and do not dare implement the needed and appropriate measures to address the famine.

Thus, the objective causes behind the famine are still a factor, but the subjective causes allowed the famine to develop and are more serious.

Rather than blame objective difficulties, [local cadres] should carry out serious self-criticism with respect to their above shortcomings, correctly recognizing what is needed for famine prevention and relief work. [This should lead to] a zealous correction and reform of one’s work.4

Đặng exhorted local cadres to do more to increase production, to “correctly implement the Government’s production and economization plan,” and to focus on producing grains such as rice, potatoes, corn, and manioc. Local cadres were to lead members of their community to “produce enough to eat and enough to store.” This meant “thoroughly implementing the Government’s directives on anti-flood and anti-drought measures,” as well as fighting the enemy’s efforts at sabotage such as the destruction of crops, agricultural tools, and irrigation networks.

The third section of the prime minister’s May 12 famine directive provided specifics about short-term tasks. Đặng stressed that, if possible, local cadres should solve the problem by using local resources rather than by compelling the government to give up rice collected from the agricultural tax, which was
Hunger, 1953

Page 183

desperately needed for the army. Thus, famine-relief solution number one involved organizing attacks on local elites who still had rice:

The general method is as follows: resolutely take those places that still have food, those people who still have food, to save those places that are hungry, those people who are hungry. In more concrete terms, this means the following:

1. Mobilize and organize the masses to borrow the rice of landlords and rich peasants. The principle for borrowing rice is persuasion accompanied by force. At the same time, stop the payment of land rents and loan debts (both the original amount of the loan and the interest) to landlords and rich peasants. The local administration must use its forces to help the hungry masses in this work.

2. Lend rice [to those who need it] from local rice-relief stores.

3. Request that the Government distribute some rice from its store to:
   a. Distribute to those who are suffering from famine (first aid)
   b. Lend to poor hungry peasants
   c. Use as payment for hungry people who can be used for work such as transport, road repair, irrigation, etc.
   d. The Ministry of National Commerce can coordinate the transport of rice to be sold to the people while at the same time collecting forestry products from the people.5

The party leaders, as was frequently the case, wanted local cadres to hold meetings to discuss the prescriptions put forward in the directive and to devise plans for implementation. But perhaps most of all (and this section was written in italics), local cadres needed to turn anti-famine work into a “mass movement”—in other words, “mobilizing, organizing, and leading the masses, bringing democracy and the positive force of the masses into play.”6

A month and a half later, though, on July 30, 1953, Đặng released a directive titled “On Economic, Production, and Rationing Work.” He reiterated that weaknesses in local leadership were the “main overall reason for the situation of scarcity and hunger in the countryside.” These weaknesses included “shortcomings in tax collection (especially the agricultural tax), the mobilization of people’s laborers, corruption, waste, and bureaucratism.”7

With respect to the agricultural tax, the Politburo decided to raise the minimum production level at which the agricultural tax would begin to be collected. Thus, anyone producing under 81 kilograms of rice (instead of the old rate of 71 kilograms) was allegedly exempt from the tax. The party leaders also called
for a 5 percent reduction in the rate of “supplemental tax” to be paid to the local administration for their use. More importantly, though, Đặng stated that the government would not collect any more than 20 percent of a peasant’s harvest. These moves were made to “ensure supply for the resistance war while lightening the contribution provided by the small producers and the laboring poor.” But the idea that the state, even with large contributions of food aid from China, could feed an army and a growing bureaucracy with a 20 percent agricultural tax rate was not realistic. And, soon enough, the party leaders would again look for ways to increase the amount of rice that peasants would hand over to the state.

Some Views of Famine from Interzone and Provincial Level Cadres

1. Famine in Interzone

Interzone 3 was composed of provinces that lay to the west and south of Hanoi, including Nam Định and Ninh Bình, which had some of the largest Catholic communities in the country. A thick archival file on hunger in 1953 contains many different reports on the situation in Interzone 3, one coming from the interzone leadership and others coming from provincial-level economic committees. Some of the reports have comments or instructions written in the margins. These were likely the comments of a high-ranking party official, possibly Phạm Văn Đặng himself. According to the report:

Famine occurred in every locality in the interzone, but because cadres at all levels care little for the livelihood of the masses, their descriptions of the situation sent to the interzone leaders are badly lacking, slow, or incorrect. Only when a group of interzone-level cadres went to the countryside to inspect the situation did it become apparent that in many places [the hunger situation] had become critical. And the cadres in communes and in hamlets were not themselves clear about the situation.

The earliest archival report on the hunger situation in Interzone 3 was written in February 1953, by which time the party leaders had already begun their campaign to blame the food crisis and other problems on feudal exploitation. After that propaganda campaign had picked up momentum (around March and April), and especially after Đặng’s May directive on famine, virtually all reports would be careful to follow his explanation: enemy, weather, and feudal exploitation. The reasons for the famine put forward in the February report
from Interzone 3 were close to those that Đặng would advance in May. The key
difference was that the Interzone 3 report mentioned the DRV state instead of
feudal exploitation:

Reasons for the Famine

• Natural disasters, weather not good for the 1952 May harvest, which ended
up being only 2/3 the level of the previous year. The October harvest was
also badly damaged. In addition to that, crops were hurt by insects and mice.
• The enemy carried out many sweeps, wrecking things over the past years.
   Now, the people are exhausted.
• Poor peasants have not harvested enough rice to pay the agricultural tax for
   the October harvest. Having sold all their rice, paying the agricultural tax
   means they have no more food.

Concerns about the government’s agricultural tax were also listed in two
other sections of the report titled “The people’s thinking,” and “What the
people wish.”

The Government has not collected the agricultural tax since last May but
is now collecting it. The people did not prepare to pay the tax by setting
aside rice earlier. When they paid the tax, they were out of food. Indeed,
for some households, after paying the tax, everybody began to cry. There
are some people who complain that the [estimated] yield level [on which
the tax percentage was based] was too high (Bình Minh subdistrict). The
people are concerned; cadres in the subdistrict have not calculated [the tax]
clearly with the people, have not allowed the people to participate in the
discussion when their estimated yields were determined, contributing to
the yields having been set high.

The section titled “What the people desire” reported that the people “want the
Government to pay back its debts to them (the rice borrowed by the province,
district, or subdistrict)—the people would like to be able to subtract that debt
from the agricultural tax.” The people wanted to “definitively settle the amount
of rice tax that they have paid so as to achieve some peace of mind.” Again, the
report makes no mention of feudal exploitation as a major cause of the famine.

This was also the case in an April 10 report on hunger from the Economic
Committee of Interzone 3, a fact that seems to have inspired the ire of Phạm Văn
Đồng. A section of that report described the situation in Nam Định province:
Among the people who lack food, the majority are landless, poor, and lower-middle peasants. The reason is that, aside from rice farming, they have no other source of work. In Y Yên, even the landlord and rich peasant families [are short on food]. Landlords in Bình Điền (Bao Dai subdistrict) have had to sell their beds and bureaus in order to eat mixed rice mash, or they eat a meal of rice followed by a meal of corn. In Vũ Bản, many cadres in the subdistrict are also struggling with hunger, eating a full meal and then a hungry meal, with their families left needy. This has also had an impact on cadres’ work. A number have turned to trading or they have taken their families [south] to Interzone 4 in order to find work. There are cadres who, because of hunger, spend the morning hunting for crayfish and snails. In the afternoon they return and carry out their political work. Those cadres who themselves have not yet been able to pay all their taxes do not dare urge the people to pay theirs.

The high-ranking party leader who read the report underlined the third and fourth sentences in the above extract describing the difficulties of landlord and rich peasant families. In the margin he wrote, “You were fooled!”

As we saw, Phạm Văn Đông had released his directive on the famine in May; the impact appears immediately in the report on famine in Interzone 3 written on June 16, 1953. Clearly taking its cue from Đông’s directive, the report writer was quick to replicate in the document’s “causes” section those that had been put forward by the prime minister in the May directive: (1) the enemy, (2) weather, and (3) feudal exploitation. Those were the “objective reasons” for the famine.

As for the “subjective” reasons, all dealt with the shortcomings of the interzone administration from top to bottom. The report did have an interesting section devoted to “secondary reasons for the famine.” Of these six secondary reasons, the first was the handling of the agricultural tax, but, in accordance with the new anti-landlord wind coming from the party leadership, the report writer explained the agricultural tax in a way that cohered with the official narrative of landlord and local-cadre collusion:

As was the case in Hòa Bình and Ninh Bình provinces, the implementation of the agricultural tax policy has also contributed to the peasants’ lack of rice. There are places where the peasants have eaten through all their rice, and [local cadres] have made a point of collecting rice from them first in order to give landlords and peasants time to disperse all their rice. Then when the cadres set out to collect the rice [for the agricultural tax], they cannot collect enough anymore. There are a few places where local cadres,
when collecting taxes, have overstated the tax level for poor and middle peasants and not, in a timely fashion, recalculated and returned to the peasants the rice due to them. In Gia Viên district, there are subdistricts where [local cadres] have used rice collected from poor and middle peasants in order to compensate for shortfalls in the amount of rice collected from landlords and rich peasants (to ensure that the subdistrict as whole has met its agricultural tax target). There are places (such as Lương Sơn) where local cadres have, in a self-serving manner, falsely reported the land of landlords and rich peasants while calculating poor and middle peasants’ land so that they must pay more in taxes. This enables cadres to reduce the amount of taxes that landlords and rich peasants must pay. Local cadres have collected the tax too slowly (the month of March), contributing to the inability of our countrymen to prepare the amount of rice needed to pay the tax. After they have paid the tax, they are short on food. There are places where yields have suffered shortfalls of over 20%, yet [local cadres] did not reduce tax burdens in a timely fashion, contributing to our compatriots’ lack of food.

The recruitment of large numbers of peasants for “people’s porters” (dân công) also contributed to the production declines. As he had with the agricultural tax, the writer of the June report described the policy of mandatory service as “people’s porters” in a way that attributed all negative effects to the manner in which the policy had been implemented by supposedly corrupt local cadres, rather than from the inevitable consequences of the policy itself. “The mobilization of people’s porters has also, in many instances, harmed production. In Hòa Bình province, there was a subdistrict that made people serve as people’s porters for 17 or 18 days in a month.” The report criticized government offices for allegedly recruiting people’s porters “when it was convenient and not thinking about the impact on the livelihood of the people.”

In his May directive, Phạm Văn Đồng had called upon party members to resolve food shortages, as much as possible, through mobilization of the masses to pressure local elites into lending their extra rice. Soon after, descriptions of these “forced lendings” became a common feature of famine reports. It appears that the “forced lendings” were organized by the interzone-level party leaders and carried out by special “interzone-level cadres” sent into chosen localities. In his assessment of how this approach fared, the report writer from Interzone 3 followed the typical format of “strengths and weaknesses.” He began by stating that these interzone cadres had “helped many localities, and, in many places, had mobilized peasants to participate enthusiastically in the forced lendings.” But the report writer appears to damn with faint praise these special cadres,
writing that they had “grasped the guidelines” of the policy only “relatively well” (tương đối).

As he turned to their “weaknesses,” the report writer listed eight issues related to these “forced lendings.” One of the eight criticisms took cadres to task for “lacking a firm class political standpoint,” for being too accommodating to landlords, for “pitying” them and advising peasants to lower their demands on landlords targeted for “forced lending.” The other seven criticisms, however, painted just the opposite picture. For example, the report writer expressed frustration with some cadres for how they chose “forced lending” targets:

Cadres do not grasp the fact that the target is the stubborn landlords and rich peasants. This means that there is no discrimination among the ranks of the landlords—between those who are stubborn and those who are relatively okay—so as to sow divisions among them. Cadres do not distinguish between a rich peasant and a middle peasant. They do not recognize that every class requires a different approach. As a result, in some places even middle peasants have become targets of struggle. Cadres operate under the slogan of “struggle” against anybody who has rice and money, forcing them to lend it. Or, cadres mechanically hold the view that all landlords are “stubborn;” the result is that “struggle” is preferred over persuasion. Cadres’ notion of what qualifies as “stubborn” behavior is too harsh. There are places where a rich peasant, having only begun uttering a few apologetic and conciliatory sentences, is immediately branded as stubborn. There are places where merchants have become the target of struggle.

Another theme of the criticisms was the way in which the “forced lendings” were carried out.

Cadres have been too inclined toward using orders instead of patient persuasion. Their impatience, their desire to attain immediate results, has led to leftist and anarchic actions. There are places (such as Kim Bang, Y Yên, Gia Viên, [. . .]) where, after gathering the peasants, they all flock to the landlord’s house and immediately start searching. In a rage, they start carrying off rice and taking furniture. There is no explanation or attempt at persuasion afforded the landlord at all. There are places where they beat the landlord. There are places where they abuse landlords by making them kneel and then striking them; [other times] they make them wear a basket on their heads when pushing them forward to be “struggled” against. In Ninh Thắng, a landlord’s daughter was seized and tied up in a buffalo pen.
The report writer complained that cadres, when leading the peasants in these “forced lendings,” did nothing to curb their “ardor” and did not intervene when things went beyond policy guidelines. “There are some circumstances in which [cadres] hold that, because the landlords and rich peasants have exploited the peasants so much, it is okay if the peasants commit a few leftist excesses.” As a result, “cadres tacitly agree to allow the masses to beat landlords, believing that only through torture will the landlords cough up their belongings for the peasants to borrow.” When the crowd of peasants arrived at the landlord’s house, “if he acted as though he had nothing, the cadre would just let the peasants into the house to take anything, including everyday things like trays, bowls, forks, and even fish sauce.”

After putting forward these criticisms, the report writer moved to the issue of how different classes viewed the “forced lendings.” With respect to the village poor, “Generally speaking, they enthusiastically participate in the “forced lending,” and, after successfully carrying it out, they believe in their strength and praise the Party and Government.” However, the report writer expressed concern about the precedent that these “forced lendings” would set in the countryside. “A few poor peasants are starting to have the mentality of relying upon the Party and the Government.” One poor peasant was apparently recorded as saying: “From now on, I am not going to be afraid of hunger anymore. If I am hungry, I will just ‘struggle.’”

With respect to the reaction of “middle peasants” to the “forced lending,” the report noted that the lower-middle peasants “zealously” participated in them, showing solidarity with the poor peasants, but were not quite as enthusiastic. As for the “upper-middle peasants”:

A number of upper-middle peasants were worried initially that they had enough to food or even extra food and could therefore become a “struggle” target. Some were afraid to admit that they were middle peasants. But after they understood the policy of the Government, realized that they were not the targets of the “forced lending” sessions, they became less anxious. A number also participated in the “struggles” but seemed a bit half-hearted. A number made allegations in support of the landlords and rich peasants, asserting that “forced lending” was actually the brutalization of landlords and rich peasants.

A number [of upper-middle peasants] who had relations with landlords and rich peasants secretly entered their houses in order to warn them to hide their belongings. When the “forced lending” session became
enthusiastic, the middle peasant would gradually lean toward the side of the poor peasants. But when [some middle peasants] saw a landlord surrender, they would often try to reduce the hatred of the landless and poor peasants, or they would be eager to compromise when the landlord had conceded close to the amount demanded, frequently showing pity for the landlord.

The “rich peasants,” it was reported, were “very worried” by the “forced lending” sessions and attempted to hide their belongings and rice. A few had apparently conspired with landlords to find a way of dealing with the poor peasants’ “forced lending” campaigns. Nevertheless, the report explained, often after a landlord had surrendered before a “forced lending” confrontation, a number of rich peasants would then seek out poor peasants in order to lend them rice and to try to “win their hearts.” A number of rich peasants tried to find a way of becoming a member of the Peasant Association. Others, because they were afraid of becoming targets of “struggle,” asked if there was any way to become a middle peasant. However, other rich peasants were apparently less conciliatory:

On the other hand, a number of rich peasants (the majority being bullies) showed themselves to be stubborn. When forced to lend they complained bitterly and spread negative ideas about the landless, poor, and middle peasants. For example, “they don’t want to work but they still want to eat” or “what’s the point in trying to become wealthy—whatever one is able to save and put aside is just taken away.”

As for the landlords themselves, they appear much like the rich peasants in the report, with some choosing a conciliatory approach and others “stubbornly” resisting. Whichever approach was taken, though, it was all typical landlord treachery. Thus, some landlords apparently met with each other to devise a group strategy for handling the “forced lending” challenge. Others tried to gain sympathy from the poor peasants through “sweet talk” or by “pretending” that they, the landlords, were also suffering from hunger. The writer of the report described one landlord in Hòa Bình province who, after learning that the peasants were going to demand a loan from him, started to “go into the forest digging for wild yams” as though out of food. According to the report, some landlords threatened the peasants, saying that they, the landlords, would get revenge when the “enemy” returned.
In this report, the comments alleged to have been made by members of local communities seem mostly plausible, though one wonders about some quotes that match too well with the regime’s propaganda. A Nam Định province report produced in July of 1953, for example, quoted poor peasants as saying, “If we had not had the Government and Chairman Hồ during this period, we would have starved to death.” Another peasant is alleged to have stated: “With the Party, the Government, and Chairman Hồ, we are definitely not afraid of starving to death.”

2. Famine in Interzone 4

Interzone 4 was composed of the two large and populous provinces of Thanh Hóa and Nghệ An along with the two more modest-sized provinces of Hà Tĩnh, and Quảng Bình. Together, these four provinces form what appears roughly as a long neck on which rests the Red River delta to the north. Since the beginning of the war, the French command had left most of this interzone to the DRV. Though seeing little fighting, Interzone 4 no doubt suffered economically from the general disruptions caused by the war, especially disruptions to the flow of goods in and out of the region.

The reports on the famine situation in Interzone 4 were all written in April 1953, before Phạm Văn Đồng’s May directive. As an April 4 report on Thanh Hóa province stated, “Here and there, in all districts of the province, there are a number of families who have slid into a situation of hunger. The hunger problem is concentrated in villages and subdistricts of the following districts: Nông Công, Tĩnh Gia, Quảng Xương, Hậu Lộc, Hoàng Hoa, Nga Sơn.” Below is the report’s description of the situation in the districts of Nông Công and Tĩnh Gia:

**Nông Công:** From Tân Phúc [in the northern part of the district] down through Hoàng Sơn, Tế Nông, Minh Khôi, Văn Thiền, Thằng Bình, and Công Liêm, the people are living poorly. This is not to mention those families that are truly struggling and lack food.

Công Liêm subdistrict has 8 families suffering from hunger.

Tân Phúc has two families that have begun to beg.

The village of Yên Dân in Trung Chính subdistrict has 24 families that are truly suffering from hunger.

Thằng Bình subdistrict is the worst:

65 families have to go without eating for 3 or 4 days. Their health has already started to deteriorate (bodies are thin and their skin, pale).
For 341 families, life has become precarious. When the weather is clear they are able to eat, but they have to eat mush and in a reduced quantity. If it rains for 3 or 4 days, they do not eat.

**Tinh Gia:**
Cát Sơn sub-district: 300 families are suffering from hunger, eating a meal of rice followed by a meal of gruel.
Tường Lính: 300 families [suffering from hunger]
Tường Văn: 460 families (the majority living next to the mountain)
Xuân Lâm: 30 families in the village of Thanh Thủy (a Catholic village)
Hải Lĩnh: 220 families

Every day, 20 to 30 people climb up to mountain fields in order to dig for yams to bring home and eat. On the days when it rains, they don’t eat.

With respect to the causes of the famine, not one of the reports from the four different provinces of Interzone 4 referred to feudal exploitation as a significant factor. For example, the section devoted to Thanh Hóa described the situation as follows:

**Thanh Hóa—reasons for famine:**

**Objective reasons:**
1. Destroyed by the enemy air attacks Gia Hà, Thạch Tân (?), Yên Dân.
2. Enemy sweeps: Đ. . . (unreadable), Giáp Ngoai, Liên Sơn.
3. Enemy blockade by sea, hampering of local fishing (the coastal sub-districts).
4. Lost harvest last year because of western wind, high salination water flooding (Tinh Gia, Nông Công).

**Subjective reasons:**
1. The main reason is the lack of leadership [by local cadres] in the field of agricultural production, especially in those regions that lost their irrigation canals. Aside from that, there are other reasons.
2. [Peasants] have contributed only a little in advanced tax payments. Then they eat through most of their rice and money. When the October harvest comes, they must pay everything [at one time]. Or, if the October harvest agricultural tax is carried out slowly, they overspend on farming.
3. Deviations in the mobilization of people’s porters. Mobilization of people who are primarily laborers without zealously helping their households with production.
4. A number of landless and poor peasants (Hậu Lộc) have invested everything into ensuring production on more land than they have had in previous years (because they have [received extra land] through redemptions or through temporary distribution) and have not received any help.

Another problem pointed out in the Thanh Hóa province report was that a “great many” of the hungry subdistricts were occupied by people whose livelihood depended solely on rice farming. They survived by gathering and selling firewood from the nearby forest, but the price of firewood had “dropped considerably,” meaning that an enormous amount of wood needed to be collected to earn enough money for the purchase of food.

The Problem of Hunger Viewed from Below

Three “Hungry” Subdistricts in Interzone 4’s Nghệ An Province

On May 13, 1953, a member of Nghệ An province’s Resistance Committee sent a report on the famine to his immediate superiors in the secretariat of the Interzone 4 Resistance Committee. In his message, this local cadre explained that the attached report dealt with the three struggling subdistricts of Văn Hiến, Hoa Lưu, and Nhân Mỹ. To research the situation there, the Nghệ An province Resistance Committee had sent one of its members, Mr. Nguyễn Đức Thi, along with Mr. Hoàng Trần Trực, the vice-chairman of the Anh Sơn district Resistance Committee, directly to Văn Hiến and Hoa Lưu to investigate.

At the same time, an attaché of the Anh Sơn district Party Committee had been sent to investigate the food situation in Nhân Mỹ, the third of the hungry subdistricts. After investigating the situation, Mr. Thi held a meeting with the subdistrict’s Resistance Committee and mass organizations (attended by cadres from each village). The meeting’s purpose was to reach a consensus on the hunger situation’s causes and solutions. That meeting, apparently in Hoa Lưu, was also attended by the attaché recruited to inspect the situation in Nhân Mỹ.

The report provided brief, shorthand descriptions of the situation in five villages of Văn Hiến subdistrict and two in Hoa Lưu subdistrict. All of these were considered “typical” of the situation throughout that subdistrict. Not a single family in any of these three subdistricts had qualified as a “landlord” according to the criteria used to carry out the census in 1950 and 1951. In the village of Văn Thái, it was reported that 130 families lacked food and that the village had two rich-peasant families—less than 2 percent of the total population. The village of
Văn Đồng had 179 total families, five of which were labeled as rich peasants—less than 3 percent. The village of Văn Thơ had 140 total families, two of which qualified as rich peasants—less than 2 percent.

In all the descriptions of these seven Nghệ An villages, only two negative comments about rich peasants appear. Two rich peasant families in the village of Văn Thái were reported a month earlier to have each had 400 to 500 kilograms of rice. One of them had apparently sold on credit some corn to people in need and had the “trick” of lending people plates that could be sold for money or food. Though certainly negative, there is nothing particularly “feudal” in this description of the village’s two rich peasants. Nor does the report link them in any direct way to the causes of the famine.

The second negative comment about a rich peasant appears in the description of one of the villages in Hoa Lữ: “The situation with rich peasants: there are six families (1 rich peasant specializes in exploiting high interest loans and supplemental rents for buffalos and cows).” This was the only mention of “feudal” exploitation in the entire report. Moreover, in none of the summaries of the reasons for the famine and in none of the reports on the people’s ideas about the causes behind the famine does feudal exploitation or any action of rich peasants appear.

The relationship that appears to be of greater concern to starving local peasants was the one between themselves and the DRV state, especially with respect to the agricultural tax. The cadre who wrote the report clearly did not dare state too strongly that the tax was a fundamental cause of the hunger in these three subdistricts, but he had subtle ways of making this an unavoidable conclusion. For example, he commented that many of the people who were suffering from hunger had paid their agricultural tax.

The report on the village of Văn Thái in Văn Hiền subdistricts notes that 40 of the roughly 139 families in the community still owed some amount of agricultural tax, with a few middle peasants short 400 to 500 kilograms of rice. In the section “opinion among the people,” the report states that people had not been able to gather the amount of rice required by the government in time and thus had felt compelled to sell furniture and water buffalos in order to meet the requirement.

The report from the village of Văn Đồng states that only 22 of the 179 families in the community had been able to pay their agricultural tax—and all families who were hungry were also short on their agricultural tax. “Of the 165 families short on food, only three had been able to pay their agricultural tax. The entire village still owes 40,000 kilograms [400 tấn] of rice.”
This description coheres with the picture of the agricultural tax as a government rice requisition that used estimated yield percentages as a means of punishing peasants for underproduction. With respect to the general opinion among the people, the report stated: “because [people] are short on their tax payment, they do not speak up about their hunger.” Another opinion was that “this year we can’t produce enough—we are dead whether we eat or not.”

As for the village of Hoa Trung, the report stated that, of the 188 total families in the village, “only 66 families had handed in their agricultural tax and, of the 96 families lacking food, the majority had paid their agricultural tax.” The report claimed that, “of the [village’s] six rich peasant families, three are still short in paying their agricultural tax but have already run out of rice. The other three have paid their agricultural tax but are now short on rice.” Under the category “public opinion,” the report stated that people felt “the estimated yield is too high (what should be /one.seven t/uni1EA1 is set at /two.three t/uni1EA1).”

The report included a section dealing with the “aspirations” of the people moving forward. First, villagers “want the agricultural tax to be reduced.” Second, they wanted to be able to borrow rice seed. Third, they wanted to borrow buffalos. And fourth, “poor and middle peasants want to be able to donate land.” This last aspiration raises a number of questions. First, why would poor, hungry peasants desire to “donate” their land rather than sell it? Second, why did this need to be expressed as an “aspiration” to the visiting cadre, as though they were not being permitted to do so? Third, why were poor and middle peasants in this village trying to own less land in the first place?

Answers to these questions were suggested in the report’s account of Hoa Tân village. There it was claimed that the village had collected 421 tạ of the 528 tạ of rice that was required of the community for the agricultural tax and that 46 of the 109 families in the village had been able to pay the tax. As for the “public opinion,” the report writer described the people as saying: “no matter what, we will have to donate our land because we have no buffalos. If the government does not accept [the donated land] then we will just abandon the field and not bother to harvest it.” It appears that many peasants wanted to reduce their amount of farmed land to ease the burden of agricultural tax.

Đặng Thai Mai Letter to Trương Chinh

On June 19, 1953, one of the DRV’s leading intellectuals, the fifty-one-year-old literature scholar, Đặng Thai Mai, penned a letter to his old friend, Trương Chinh. Thai Mai wrote from his native Nghệ An province in Interzone 4, where
he apparently spent much of the war. In the letter’s opening lines, he explained to Chinh, “I am sending this letter up to you to present a few more things. I also sent a letter to the Interzone 4 Party branch (K.U.L.K.IV). But there are some issues that I need to report so that the [Party] Central Committee has a clear understanding.”

The first issue concerned taxes for 1953:

On the issue of 1953 taxes, I already put forward a couple of ideas in my previous letter. Now, after having inspected the situation myself—after having asked a few comrades and a number of regular people [dân chúng], I hope that you can pay some attention to the issue of tax rate [thuế biểu]. Maybe Nghệ An province’s yield levels need to be reconsidered. In 1951, usually four bushels of harvested rice stalk (including the flowers) was calculated to produce one tạ [100 kilograms] of rice. In 1952, the province Party leadership set the amount of rice required for each district. Each district would then divide the required amount among the subdistricts. There are some subdistricts that have set the rice productivity level at two and a half bushels for 100 kilograms of rice, though the majority of districts were set at three bushels. It was the same for Hà Tĩnh province. The result is that there are some places where an acre [mẫu] of paddy is required to produce a yield of 3,200 or 3,500 kilograms. In the past, even the best rice fields were only expected to yield 2,500 or 2,800 kilograms of rice per acre. I asked many peasants who farmed one or two acres and they all said that there was no way of meeting that yield level. I dare to put forward this issue because I have followed the situation in my region pretty carefully. And the reality is that this year I have heard many peasants complaining a lot about the attitude of cadres who set the [agricultural tax] yield levels. Therefore, I feel that I need to report this situation to the Zone Party branch and to the Central Committee.

To buttress his point, Đặng Thai Mai referred to the recent economic report of Maksim Saburov, who was the Chairman of the Soviet Union’s State Planning Committee. Saburov’s report had been delivered at the CPSU’s 19th Congress the previous October. Thai Mai pointed out that Subarov, in his discussion of the “Five-Year-Plan to Develop the Soviet Union,” had stated that the country, in its estimation of the yields for irrigated lands, had only planned for a productivity level of 4,000 to 5,000 kilograms per hectare. “Therefore, four years from now, even with their technology, even with their manpower, the Soviets are only expecting to reach a productivity level of 2,000 to 2,500 kilograms
per half-hectare, which is still more than one of our acres (in Central Vietnam, an acre is 4,900 square meters).” The strong implication of Thai Mai’s letter was that the Party Central Committee was out of touch with reality.

In the politest terms, Thai Mai also complained to Trương Chinh about the party’s policy of political struggle against the landlord class:

Second thing: the current struggle movement being led by the Central Committee surely will bring about the good result that the people’s regime will be respected. However, at the same time, it would be good if the Party and government could send an inspection group here to determine whether the people had any anger or concerns with how the general policy was being implemented. That inspection group could then report to the Zone Party branch and the Central Committee so that all local shortcomings could be adjusted. I am certain that the result would be very good for the political awakening and confidence of the people [in the Party leadership].

Đặng Thai Mai found it particularly galling that the granddaughter of the great patriot Phan Bội Châu (1868–1945) had been ensnared in the growing political campaign against “landlords.” This woman’s husband was a lieutenant in the DRV army. Back in her Nghệ An village, she served in the women’s branch of the United Vietnam Association. Cautiously, Thai Mai pointed out that this granddaughter of Phan Bội Châu rented out two acres (one mậu) of land because her husband was absent serving the military effort. “In the recent May harvest, that paddy produced ten bushels of rice, but she only received ‘armfuls’ [lưm] when each bushel has 8 armfuls (there are places where landlords have to reduce rents by 85% . . .).” As a result, Thai Mai pointed out, her family “lived in extremely difficult circumstances.”

In his letter, Thai Mai also let Trương Chinh know that Phan Bội Châu had another granddaughter in the village. She only had a third of an acre of paddy on which to raise her two children of nine and twelve years. They only had enough food to eat every other meal. Thai Mai requested that Trương Chinh arrange with the Interzone party branch to have these two children sent to China for study, insisting that his motivation for this request was not based on a “notion of how to treat the descendants of a great revolutionary.” Rather, the main reason was that Phan Bội Châu still had a fair number of admirers in Nghệ An and Hà Tĩnh provinces. “If we allow his family to live in miserable circumstances, it creates an opportunity for those who are dissatisfied to spread criticisms. This is truly a small matter, yet I still wrote this letter to you—please do not blame me too much.” In a revealing concluding sentence, Đặng Thai Mai wrote to
Trương Chinh: “Please believe that I always try to be close to the actual lives of the people.”

The primary causes of peasant hardship in 1953 were the disruptions and difficulties brought about by the war along with the severe tax burden placed on the countryside by the party leaders, who had no choice but to inspire, cajole, and, if needed, force peasants to feed the DRV’s war effort. In comparison to these things, feudal exploitation by local elites does not seem to have been a meaningful factor contributing to the spreading hunger crisis in 1953. Over the seven years of war, the key drain on peasant rice certainly shifted from local elites to the DRV state.

This new tax burden, extracted initially by the party-state through means of straight requisition and then through an agricultural tax based on (highly elevated) estimated yields, seems to have been great enough to kill much of the joy of free land distributions carried out by the regime since taking power. In the reports, we see examples of peasants who had returned to the local party apparatus land that had been allocated to them. Other peasants (in Nghệ An) apparently wished to do so as a means of reducing their tax burden and avoiding the accumulation of debt to the DRV state. Thus, the archival file on hunger in 1953 also does not support another key pillar of the regime’s official justification for land reform—the notion of great land hunger among peasants in the DRV countryside. Had peasants been offered these land distributions with a lower tax obligation to the DRV state, such that the receipt of land correlated to an increase in the peasants’ disposable income, no doubt the land hunger claimed by the party leaders would have rapidly materialized.

Let’s consider for a moment how some of the above-mentioned reports about peasant attitudes and behaviors might have appeared to Politburo members in 1953. These were patriotic men who had spent most of their adult lives working as professional revolutionaries for the liberation of their country and for the dream of a socialist Vietnam. In many cases, their careers had involved long, brutal stays in prison. Four years ago, Chinese Communists had prevailed, meaning that the world’s largest country was now socialist. Vietnam lay on the southern border of a unified Communist bloc that covered most of Asia and Europe. In late 1950 and early 1951, the DRV forces had turned Soviet and Chinese military support into a devastating blow to France, nearly taking Hanoi. For the last couple of years (1952 and 1953), the DRV had held the initiative in the fighting but had not been able to deliver the dramatic victory needed to end the conflict. The war was now in its seventh year. Tens of thousands of Vietnamese had been killed or wounded, but the French were wavering in their resolve.
In the light of these circumstances, the thinking of Thành, Trường Chinh, Phạm Văn Đồng, Võ Nguyên Giáp, and other party leaders about the behavior of the rural population can be imagined: We have the French on the ropes; tens of thousands of our soldiers and civilians have already been killed; we desperately need more food for our troops. How can villagers demand that we subtract their fixed-rice-purchase contributions from the agricultural tax? How can poor peasants refuse to farm temporarily distributed land on the grounds that the tax rate is too high? How can other villagers intentionally reduce their area of cultivation to limit their agricultural tax exposure? How can villagers complain that the recruitment of people’s porters occurs at inconvenient times? War is inherently inconvenient and cannot be managed according to your schedule. What about the inconvenience of having been colonized for eighty years?