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Reinvigorating the Land Reform, 1955–1956

With the French gone, the threat of the Geneva Accords’ 300-day period of free movement over, and the doors out of North Vietnam officially shut, the DRV’s party leaders quickly raised the mass mobilization campaign’s profile again. A little over a year remained before the regime’s self-imposed deadline of June 1956. The party had only carried out land reform in about 735 of the 3,314 subdistricts slated for the campaign. This amounted to less than two million of North Vietnam’s roughly ten million rural inhabitants. In other words, the party leaders had about one year to put roughly eight million people through the land reform.¹

Between the official end of the 300 days of free movement in late May of 1955 (the period ended up being extended for two months) and the 7th Plenum of the party Central Committee, scheduled for the middle of August, Nguyễn Tất Thành took the opportunity to visit Beijing and Moscow for the first time as “President Hồ Chí Minh,” leader of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. This time, the Soviet leadership rolled out the red carpet—every single member of the CPSU Presidium waited on the Moscow airport tarmac for “Comrade Din’s” arrival. According to Ilya Gaiduk, however, this “splendid” reception was meant to compensate for the reluctance of the Soviet leaders to make any similarly splendid military or economic commitments to the DRV.

Through negotiations with his hosts, Thành was able to secure for the DRV 400 million rubles in economic aid, promises that Soviet technical advisers would be sent to Vietnam, and scholarships for DRV students at Soviet universities. But, as Gaiduk points out, this was “nothing like” the Sino-Soviet treaty of 1950 that Thành had coveted back then. The Soviet leadership still preferred that the DRV work primarily under the direct guidance of the Chinese, particularly in military matters.²

A few weeks before the Moscow visit, in a meeting with the Soviet ambassador to the DRV, Thành had apparently raised the issue of whether it would be expedient to have Võ Nguyên Giáp join the delegation so that he could meet
with Soviet military leaders. This suggestion had been declined. As a letter from the Soviet military’s general staff to the Soviet Foreign Ministry had explained: “the Vietnamese comrades could at any time receive necessary consultation from us through the command of the People’s Liberation Army of China as it is practicing in the present time.”

Thus, Thành did not include Giáp in the delegation, but he did bring Trường Chinh, the party general secretary. This appears to have been Chinh’s first time outside of northern Vietnam. During their month of travel together, Thành and Chinh would have had ample time together to discuss the situation back home. The top party leaders were apparently frustrated with how the land reform was proceeding, arguing that “rightist deviations” (i.e., being too soft on the landlord class) had become all too common. In their thinking, the arrival of peace and the chaos of the Geneva Accords had affected the mentality of the mass mobilization apparatus, taking the sting out of the campaign.

The Fight against “Rightest Deviations” in the Land Reform

Looking back over the past four months, Thành and Chinh could count at least four measures taken to ensure that those serving in the land reform apparatus, currently 21,679 cadres, would make the campaign achieve the mass mobilization’s unspecified “required goals.” First, in February of 1955, the party leaders had expanded the party “reorganization” up the rungs of power from the subdistrict to the district level. Such an upward expansion of the purge raised the stakes for those district-level party members considering whether to “stick their necks out” to save subdistrict-level members targeted in the land reform.

Second, at the 7th Central Committee Plenum in March of 1955, the party leaders had apparently held discussions with Central Committee members who were concerned about “leftist deviations” (i.e., too much violence in the attack on the landlord class) during the land reform. In the eyes of the party leaders, it was “rightist deviations” that were the far greater threat. According to the “Discussion” document produced at the end of the 7th Plenum, Thành and Chinh seem to have fallen back on the Leninist principle of party discipline to enforce their view of the situation.

The apparent discord between the top party leaders and regular Central Committee members suggests the possibility that the true nature and goals of the mass mobilization campaign was a secret of the Politburo not shared with second-tier party leaders. It is possible that Central Committee members questioned the plausibility of the party leadership’s estimation of the “enemy.” The mass mobilization campaign was now nearly two years old—this was plenty of
time for rumors about the “struggle sessions,” the execution of landlords, and the ferreting out of Nationalist Party cells to spread among the northern population. By March of 1955, local elites and actual Nationalist Party members who thought themselves possible targets of the campaign had had eight months to leave for the South. Second-tier Central Committee members might have wondered why the Politburo had not adjusted its estimate of the enemy to account for this reality.

Third, in early June 1955, the party Secretariat had released a resolution dealing with “Organization Work.” It called for the party reorganization to be expanded upward yet again. Now provincial-level party organizations were to be targeted. As the resolution explained:

Through the land reform and the reorganization of district-level [party branches], it has become apparent that provincial-level [party branches] are still complicated. A number of provincial-level offices continue to be dominated by bad elements, which has hindered the implementation of the Party and Government’s policies. Therefore, immediately after the completion of land reform in a province, that province’s [Party leadership] should be reorganized. The reorganization of provincial-level Party branches will be carried out directly by the Central Committee. 

This announcement surely gave provincial party leaders pause as they considered how to handle the land reform in their province. Who would dare act in a way that could be construed as having “hindered” the mass mobilization campaign?

Fourth, the party leaders had pushed to tie promotions and demotions more strongly to performance during the land reform:

The mass mobilization is a good opportunity to understand more clearly the substance of every cadre, which helps the Party’s leading organs promote and use cadres in a more correct and close manner. Currently, in our anti-feudal front, we have a very large force of cadres participating. That provides an extremely convenient occasion to promote and discipline cadres in order to reorganize their ranks. During the land reform, discipline and promotion can be carried out not only with a number of cadres participating in the mass mobilization but also, to a certain extent, with cadres who have not yet participated in the campaign. With respect to these cadres, discipline and promotion can be based on both their attitude toward the mass mobilization and on the materials discovered [about them] by the masses. 

As the resolution stated, “any cadres who, despite having been educated about the land reform, continue to refuse service as cadres, should be punished
appropriately.” Similarly, the party leaders wanted performance in the land reform to have a more direct impact on a cadre’s professional status after his return from the campaign. A cadre who had been disciplined during the land reform should not return to his job and be kept in the same position, much less promoted.8

Further Radicalization after Thánh and Chinh’s Return from the Soviet bloc

Thân and Chinh returned from their trip overseas on July 23, 1955 with about three weeks to prepare for the Central Committee’s 8th Plenum, scheduled for the middle of August. What they heard and read apparently convinced them that the above measures had been insufficient to curb the trend toward “rightist deviations” in the land reform. At the plenum, they announced the mass mobilization campaign’s third phase, “Reinspection” (phúc tra). As Chinh explained in his report:

Our Party organization and leadership is not yet appropriate to the level and demand of the masses and cadres after land reform. In the countryside today, the organization still has many levels and the division of work is not yet clear, with many cadres having overlapping responsibilities. There are places where the Party organization is not yet pure, where there is a lack of unity between new and old members of the Party branch, where the branch leadership is in a state of confusion. The district-level Party branches have been consolidated, but are still green, while zone and provincial-level leaders have not yet improved their leadership in places that have carried out land reform. They are still heavy on formalistic meetings; they have not yet fully grasped the situation; and they do not yet see clearly the difficulties of those below them. Many upper-level cadres have misperceptions about areas that have already gone through land reform. Either they believe that, after land reform, everything is fine and no more problems exist, or, seeing difficulties, they become pessimistic, thinking that the land reform has “gone nowhere.”

The situation described above has presented us with a task—we must consolidate those places that have undergone land reform. Therefore, we must organize the reinspection of the countryside. The Central Land Reform Committee must prepare a policy, a plan, and cadres in order to inspect communes that have gone through land reform. This is to help
peasants solve remaining problems, fix weak points and mistakes, and organize peasants to engage in production correctly according to the Party’s principles and guidelines.9

The reinspection wave was based on Chinese Communist models and had surely been a part of the DRV’s three-stage mass mobilization plan (rent reduction, land reform, reinspection) from the beginning.10

The concept of reinspection was vague enough to be infused with different meanings. One possibility was to reinspect regions discreetly, making no effort to use the findings to influence implementation of the campaign’s two preceding phases, rent reduction and land reform. A second possibility was to publicize the results of the reinspection as a means of moderating the implementation of the earlier two phases. In taking this option, the party leaders could announce that reinspection had revealed too aggressive an attack on landlords. A third option was to propagandize the results of the reinspection in a manner that pressured land-reform phase cadres to find more targets for repression. This was the option taken by Thanh, Chinh, and the Politburo.

Following the land reform phase’s fourth wave, carried out roughly during the latter half of 1955, Thanh and Chinh made another move to ensure that the mass mobilization apparatus found the required number of targets for repression. A January 27, 1956 directive written by Nguyen Duy Trinh on behalf of the party Secretariat stated that “[d]uring wave 8 of the rent reduction and wave 4 of the land reform, the brigade leaders all had to carry out a thorough self-criticism because they saw that they were still disregarding the work of reorganizing Party branches. That is a major weakness that needs to be addressed.”11 According to the directive, “brigade leaders and cadres had not probed deeply to grasp firmly the special situation of [local Party] branches.” These mass mobilization leaders “had not fully recognized the wicked and sophisticated schemes of the landlord class and their reactionary political organizations that dominate party branches.”12

The Media Campaign

The Politburo also used a rigorous press campaign to reinforce these efforts at intimidating the mass mobilization apparatus into finding more targets. DRV newspapers released a steady stream of articles insisting that rural North Vietnam remained full of evil landlords, saboteurs, spies, Nationalist Party members, traitors, and landlord sympathizers. All were alleged to be working in concert
toward the collective goal of destroying the revolution. The party’s main vehicles for the promotion of this narrative were the Central Committee organ, The People, and the recently established theoretical journal, Study (December 1955).

Throughout June 1955, The People published a string of articles exhorting land reform cadres to attack the landlord class with more resolve. The June 11 issue published an article titled “Sharpen Even More the Spirit of Vigilance with the Landlord Class: Resolutely Struggle against Rightist Thinking and Fear of the Enemy.” Two days later the newspaper published a pair of articles in a similar spirit. The first was “Raise Vigilance and Destroy the Landlord Class’s Scheme of Sabotage” and the second was “Carrying out Self-Criticism for Rightist Thinking.” On June 17, The People published an article titled “Landlord Ruses to Sabotage the Land Reform in Bác Giang.” Similar articles appeared in July: “After Fixing the Rightist Thinking of Cadres, Land Reform in Lấm-Thành Hamlet Was Successful;” in August: “After Undergoing Thought Reform for Step 2, Cadres Have Begun to Fix Their Rightist Thinking, Work Has Improved;” in September: “Recognize Clearly the Landlords’ Schemes and Promptly Repress Their Acts of Sabotage;” in October: “The Rent Reduction Team of Chiến Thắng Subdistrict (Lang Sơn) Probed Deeply, Found a Cruel Despotic Landlord Ringleader, and Discovered a Commando Organization;” in November: “Working against Enemy Sabotage of the Land Reform in Bác Ninh—Bác Giang.” Similar ideas about the alleged reaction of the landlord class appear in dozens of other articles about the land reform.

The party’s theoretical journal, Study, delivered much the same fare. Its opening issue contained an article by Hồ Việt Thắng, the vice-minister of agriculture and one of the most important members of the Central Land Reform Committee. Thắng began with a reformulation of the standard justification for the land reform and concluded with the following assessment of the campaign as it approached its fifth and final wave:

The land reform movement is now entering its decisive phase. We are about to implement wave 5 of the land reform in a large area that had been occupied by the enemy for a long time, that is densely populated, and that is extremely complicated in many respects. The landlord class, which has allied with the Americans and their lackeys, is trying hard to sabotage the land reform and, generally speaking, is sabotaging us in all facets. They stop at no evil scheme to achieve their barbaric and dark goal.

A shorter article in that first December 1955 issue of Study was titled “Raise Revolutionary Vigilance.” It conveyed a similar picture of landlord ruses and cadre reluctance:
During wave 4 of the land reform, the landlord class allied with the American imperialists and their lackeys, working to sabotage us ruthlessly. But many of our cadres demonstrated a critical loss of vigilance. The enemy would carry out murders, which one cadre quickly attributed to the deceased people’s “fear of having their class raised, afraid of being targeted for struggle, and therefore having committed suicide.” The enemy organizes the throwing of dirt and rocks, the burning of houses, and the clipping of telephone wires. A number of comrades do not investigate, or they only investigate superficially. They conclude that “the house burned by accident,” or “the wires were cut by mischievous young kids.” These cadres fall prey to the arguments put forward by the enemy to throw them off track. Even more serious, there are cadres who blindly “relied” on the enemy’s henchmen and listened to them, arresting good poor peasants, or allowing [these henchmen] to borrow documents and clothing to pretend that they are cadres. They [the henchmen] then go to another locality and sabotage the movement there. Because our cadres have lost their vigilance in this way, for a long period of time in a number of places, the enemy was not attacked, the masses were not mobilized, and the work of land reform was delayed.21

An article in the following issue of Study (January 1956) hammered home the same theme: “The landlord class, especially its cruel and despotic members, its saboteurs, and its spies, are even more furiously, madly, and perfidiously resisting. A number of cadres, having not recognized this situation in a timely manner, have committed serious rightist deviations.”22 In February 1956, the journal published an article titled “The Enemy Must be Resolutely and Promptly Attacked in Order to Push Forward Wave 5 of the Land Reform.”23

The Fifth Land Reform Wave: January-July 1956

The mass mobilization campaign had been designed largely along the Chinese model of visiting villages three times (rent reduction, land reform, reinspection). Toward the end of 1955, over half of the DRV rural population had still not experienced the second, land-reform phase of the mass mobilization. Yet the goal of the party leaders had been to complete the campaign in the summer of 1956. At some point toward the latter part of 1955, Thanh must have decided that the campaign should not drag on past their self-imposed summer-of-1956 deadline.

The Politburo’s solution to the pressure of time was to condense and accelerate the campaign. Communities that had not undergone any of the three mobilization phases would skip rent reduction and immediately undergo the
more radical land-reform phase as part of one enormous fifth and final wave. Still concerned about “rightist tendencies,” Thành and the Politburo decided to call this giant fifth wave the “Diên Biên Phú wave” in the struggle against the landlord class. It is unclear whether the revised schedule affected the campaign’s reinspection phase.

The Politburo managed reinspection as they had the rent reduction and land reform phases of the mass mobilization: carry out a small experimental wave in a few subdistricts followed by a summing-up meeting that would affirm reinspection’s general goals. The party leaders also released a special reinspection directive, which is referred to in an archival document from the Vietnamese North Interzone Land Reform Committee (to be discussed presently). That directive does not appear in the Party Documents series. Yet the document on the reinspection from the Vietnamese North Interzone claims to be “based” on it, enabling us to infer its main points.

As noted above, the reinspection of places that had been through the land-reform phase of mass mobilization could be used to send a signal to land-reform brigade leaders currently preparing to or actually carrying out the campaign’s fifth and final wave. A description of the reinspection in the party’s theoretical journal, Study, shows the meaning that party leaders gave to this third and final phase. The experimental wave of reinspection in five communes of Phú Thọ province showed that the land reform phase had, “generally speaking,” been carried out well. This represented “a basic revolutionary victory” for the people of the five communes. “However,” the Study article cautioned, “a number of weaknesses remain, such as letting landlords slip through the net (để lọt), including some cruel and despotic ones who act as ringleaders of sabotage efforts.” Obviously, the message here was that land-reform brigade leaders had lacked thoroughness in their attacks on the landlord class. “Through reinspection, the scheme of the landlord class to raise their heads up and carry out sabotage was repressed, the spirit of unity in the countryside further strengthened, and production pushed forward.”

A report on reinspection produced by the Land Reform Committee of the Vietnamese North Zone shows that repression of alleged enemies remained the primary concern:

The Land Reform Committee of the Vietnamese North Interzone
No. 14 Report
4/3/1956
REPORT
Proposed plan for carrying out land reform reinspections waves 2, 3, 4, 5 in the Vietnamese North Interzone.

Based on the directive of the Central Committee and the Interzone leadership, the Vietnamese North Interzone Land Reform Committee held a meeting with the Party leaders of Bắc Giang, Thái Nguyên, Vĩnh Phúc, and Phú Thọ provinces in order to discuss preparations for carrying out the reinspections of the land reform in those provinces that have carried out land reform. In accordance with the spirit of the Central Committee’s directive, [reinspection] will first be carried out in important subdistricts such as those lying next to key roads, around provincial towns, in places that have leading [Party and government] offices, and in places where there are important state-owned enterprises. At the same time, [the reinspections of key places] needs to clean up districts, making it easier for the district Party leaders to lead and focus on the task of reinspecting the land reform when completed in their district. After discussing this with provincial leaders, we have come to the following resolutions:

The Situation and Special Characteristics of Regions Where We Are Preparing to Reinspect the Land Reform in 4 Provinces of the Vietnamese North Interzone

After studying the spirit of the Central Committee’s directive as mentioned above, the interzone leadership made preparations and delegated to comrade Nguyễn Tấn Phúc (the interzone Party member responsible for reinspection) responsibility for meeting with provincial leaders to carry out the plan. On February 2, 1956, they met and discussed with provincial leaders how to prepare reinspection for the above-mentioned subdistricts and to [discuss] the special characteristics of these places:

1. Bắc Giang: We will carry out reinspection in those subdistricts around the provincial town of Phủ Lý Lang Thường [now Bắc Giang City]. This was a center of activity for the counterrevolutionaries during the resistance war as well as after the establishment of peace and during the land reform. Moreover, it is a place where we have many of our enterprises such as factories, a train platform, and important offices. It also has important road and water transportation routes such as highway 1, the railroad, a large bridge, a port, etc. It is a densely populated place. During the third wave of the land reform there, the enemy carried out serious acts of sabotage such as the murder of six people in Hưng Tien and three murders in Thọ Xương. In Sông
Mai, Tân Mị, and Chi minh, there occurred serious incidents of sabotage such as killing people and burning houses. This was the region where the enemy operated most strongly against the land-reform brigade during Wave 3. But we struggled against the enemy’s efforts at sabotage very weakly. There was not a single subdistrict where the culprit of a planned murder was found in a satisfactory way, and there was no place where the base of the enemy’s reactionary organization was thoroughly discovered. After the land reform, the enemy carried out serious acts of sabotage. Common among the above subdistricts were efforts to sabotage tax collection, sabotage production, and burn houses. Even more serious is the fact that there are places like Thọ Xuân where mines have been set three times (one time was by a pile of bamboo planks about to be used by the army for the construction of a house, one time by the door of the Agricultural Department, and one time a bomb was set just before the arrival of a French peace convoy to visit us—it was defused afterward.) Also, in this subdistrict, after the land reform, there are 11 youths who meet on their own initiative to engage in debauchery [chơi bời] and to go [text unreadable] with each other. Four months ago, in Tân Mị, there was a murder that remains unsolved, or, as in Thái Sơn during a morning meeting about taxes, a guerrilla hid and threw a grenade into the meeting spot. With respect to our organization, there are places where 2/3 of the Party cell executive committee lies silent like in Thọ Xuân, where we suspect that the general secretary of the Party branch is an enemy element. 25

The report’s descriptions of the other three provinces slated for reinspection had the same focus on security and repression, with little time devoted to issues of agriculture. Reinspection cadres, like rent-reduction and land-reform cadres before them, would enter communities and, for a third time, look for people who could be punished as “cruel despotic landlords” or “enemy elements.”

Khrushchev’s Secret Speech (February 24, 1956)

In early February 1956, as wave 5 of the land reform was picking up steam, Trường Chinh and fellow Politburo member Lê Đức Thọ traveled together to Beijing. There they joined the Chinese Communist Party delegation heading to the Soviet Union for the CPSU 20th Congress, to be held in Moscow from February 14 to 24. 26 This meant that Chinh would be absent from the DRV for
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over a month during the largest wave of the mass mobilization, when more than half the North’s rural population would undergo land reform. This absence does not square with the level of blame that Chinh would end up shouldering for the campaign’s violence. Had Chinh played an indispensable role in the campaign’s implementation, would Thành have permitted him to leave the DRV for over a month during the campaign’s crucial final wave?

In reality, the land reform campaign was the project of the Politburo, and probably no one person of that body was indispensable to the campaign’s implementation. Hoàng Quốc Việt, Phạm Văn Đồng, and, of course, Thành himself, could just as easily have met with the Central Land Reform Committee and provided instructions to Hồ Việt Thắng, the person who connected the party leaders in Hanoi with the mass-mobilization brigade leaders in the countryside.

Khrushchev’s secret speech, delivered the night of February 24, 1956 at the CPSU 20th Congress, was titled, “On the Personality Cult and its Consequences.” The term “personality cult” was the Soviet leader’s way of referring to what Westerners called “Stalinism.” In his speech, Khrushchev spoke for roughly four hours about Stalin’s crimes and shortcomings as a leader. In the words of Khrushchev biographer William Taubman, the secret speech “was the bravest and most reckless thing [Khrushchev] ever did. The Soviet regime never fully recovered and neither did he.” 27

Khrushchev’s speech focused on how “the cult of the person of Stalin” became “the source of a whole series of exceedingly serious and grave perversions of Party principles, of Party democracy, and of revolutionary legality.” Over the years, the “accumulation of immense and limitless powers in the hands of one person” had caused “great harm” to the CPSU and the Soviet Union. Providing quotes from Marx and Lenin, Khrushchev pointed out “how severely the classics of Marxism-Leninism denounced every manifestation of the cult of the individual.” 28

After establishing the heterodox nature of Stalin’s personality cult, Khrushchev explored its manifestations. The bulk of the secret speech was devoted to the period from 1934 to 1938, what the historian Robert Conquest referred to as the “Great Terror.” 29 According to Khrushchev, this was when “Stalin’s willfulness vis-à-vis the Party and its Central Committee became fully apparent.” In the speech, Khrushchev detailed Stalin’s “fabrication of cases,” his “false accusations,” and his “glaring abuses of socialist legality, which resulted in the death of innocent people.” 30 Among those innocent people were 98 members of the 139-member Central Committee in 1934. These men, “often no longer able to
bear barbaric tortures,” confessed to “all kinds of grave and unlikely crimes,” for which they “were arrested and shot.”

Though Chinh and Thô did not attend the “Closed Session” during which Khrushchev delivered his famous speech, they would have received copies of it before leaving Moscow. Reading the speech, Chinh must have been concerned about its striking relevance to the situation back home in North Vietnam. First, the DRV obviously had a full-blown personality cult, which had now been shown to be contrary to the ideas of Marx and Lenin. Second, Chinh and his comrades in the Politburo had promoted Stalin as a great leader of the “democratic” camp. In the secret speech, he looked like a paranoid dictator, a mass murderer, and a disastrous bungler during early days of WWII. Third, the secret speech focused on Stalin’s crimes during a period, 1934 to 1938, that overlapped precisely with Thành’s longest stay in Moscow. Having witnessed this period, how would the DRV leader explain his promotion of Stalin and the Soviet system? Fourth, the violations of “socialist legality” described by Khrushchev were similar to practices that the VWP leaders were now employing in the land reform campaign: the idea that “enemies” lurked in every community, the extraction of false confessions (usually through threats and torture), the abandonment of “normal” judicial procedures (the Special People’s Courts), and official pressure on those courts to deliver rapid verdicts.

If rank-and-file party members were to read Khrushchev’s secret speech, they might lose faith in the Politburo and the Soviet Union. How could Chinh, Thô, and other party leaders continue to insist on the moral superiority of the Soviet Union if Khrushchev’s shocking depiction of Stalin’s bloody reign were to become well known? Khrushchev all but guaranteed this eventuality when he ordered that the speech be distributed widely and studied carefully by party members in the Soviet Union. What if the speech fell into the hands of the Capitalist bloc and rank-and-file party members heard about it via news sources of that bloc? In such a scenario, it might appear that the DRV leaders were afraid of the speech and had intentionally tried to conceal its message. As it turned out, the West learned of Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin the day after it happened, obtained a copy of the actual speech in mid-April, and published it in major newspapers in early June. In the next chapter, I will examine how the DRV’s party leaders handled the dangerous messages of the 20th Congress, especially its call for the Communist bloc to fight against the cult of personality.

The implications of the 20th Congress were addressed by the party leaders at the 9th Plenum of the Central Committee held from April 19 to 24, 1956. The
internal documents produced from that plenum express ideas about the Hồ Chí Minh personality cult and about some of the other main messages of the CPSU 20th Congress. But the documents contain no discussion of how Khrushchev’s thoughts about Stalin’s crimes might be relevant to the DRV’s mass mobilization campaign.

On May 5 and 6, 1956, ten days after the close of the Central Committee’s 9th Plenum, the Central Land Reform Committee held its eighth meeting. Again, it seems significant that the meeting was held immediately following the 9th Plenum of the Central Committee, as though the ideas about the campaign from the top party leaders were transmitted to the Central Land Reform Committee after having been presented to the more powerful and important Central Committee.

Through informal means, I was able to obtain a copy of the report on the mass mobilization read by one of the campaign’s most important leaders, Hồ Việt Thắng, the vice-minister of agriculture. As with virtually all party reports on the implementation of policy, Thắng’s report to Central Land Reform Committee took a linear approach, criticizing “deviations” both to the right and to the left of the imagined correct line. Although Thắng did acknowledge the occurrence of “leftist excesses” such as the use of torture to uncover “reactionary organizations,” on balance, he still leaned to the side of “rightist deviations” as the primary danger. Thắng began with the following description:

One: Achievements of Wave 5 after Three Steps of Work

The special characteristic of wave 5 is [that it comprises] important regions, regions that have just recently been liberated, the area next to the demilitarized zone, the coastal areas, places heavily populated by Catholics, and areas surrounding cities. The situation in these areas is very complicated.

Throughout the past period, the landlord class allied with the reactionary lackeys of the American imperialists to furiously resist and sabotage the land reform. They carry out their sabotage in a comprehensive manner, using schemes that are sophisticated and Machiavellian, not stopping at the most barbaric and cruel actions. They:

Propagandize a march to the North, propagandize war.

Plant the problem of being related [to landlords], distort all aspects of our policy in order to create anxiety among the masses.

. . . have their henchmen carry out confessions, make fake documents, use beautiful women, all with the intention of tricking cadres and getting them to focus on a different target of struggle.
The most barbaric is killing people. They kill poor peasant denouncers [khô chû] to prevent them from speaking bitterness. They even kill children in order to repress the spirit of the masses, murder cadres to carry out revenge, kill each other in order to silence informers. Up to now, they have instigated many cases of murder, fifteen of which have led to the death of land reform cadres.

They destroy production and sabotage the government’s ability to implement its State plan. In many places, they wreck irrigation dams, dump insects into fields, and kill buffalos.

The [Party] organizations in these areas are impure to a critical degree. In many cases of sabotage, [land reform cadres] have discovered the participation of guerrillas that were planted by the enemy.

Tháng then moved to the “successes” of the campaign in wave 5. These were listed numerically from one to six. Though we should not read too much into their order, it seems significant that the first was the land reform’s “overthrow” of “cruel despotic landlords” and the “strong repression” of “saboteurs.” As this first of the six “successes” explained, “through the effective mobilization of the masses against the enemy’s sabotage, in many places [the campaign] was able to uncover most of the cases of sabotage.” And knowing how to “sow internal divisions among the enemy, [land reform cadres] were able to discover reactionary organizations, strike down their ringleaders and backbone elements while winning over and educating those people who took the wrong path.” The second “success” was the expropriation of land and food from landlords; third was the confiscation of weapons; fourth was the reorganization of party and state political bodies at the local level; fifth was the (alleged) peasant enthusiasm for raising production; and sixth was the “dogged working spirit” shown by mass mobilization cadres, who were willing to “endure hardships” to complete their tasks.

After establishing these “successes,” Tháng shifted to the land reform’s weaknesses. Here the inherent ambiguity of the linear analytical approach is apparent, as it is unclear from the following criticism how a cadre should act:

In general, there is still a lack of determination and especially a lack of thoroughness in striking the enemy. But there are also many places where signs of leftist deviations have appeared (arresting too many people in a careless manner, repressing [enemies] without attempting to sow divisions as well). Signs of disorganization and lack of discipline have also appeared in many places, with [cadres] arresting people without asking higher-ups for directions. Through a lack of thoroughness in striking against the enemy,
a lack of combining strikes with efforts to propagandize broadly the policy, and through a lack of striking at the ringleaders in order to divide the enemy to the highest degree, up to now, there are still many places where the enemy carries out serious acts of sabotage and the masses are still afraid of the enemy.

A land reform cadre reading this passage could ask the question, “how hard do I need to attack the enemy to avoid being accused of exhibiting the ‘general’ lack of determination while not taking things too far, committing ‘leftist deviations?’” Or, the cadre might ask, “is the enemy still carrying out ‘serious acts of sabotage’ because cadres lacked thoroughness or because they have not confined their strikes to the enemy ringleaders?”

Thằng's report acknowledged weaknesses in the land reform’s “reorganization” of party branches. And here we see another early hint of the official explanation that the party leaders would soon use to explain the violence of the campaign. “The task of building our forces, of reorganizing Party branches, has not yet received the right amount of attention.” Without naming a subject, Thằng stated that the “estimation of the situation with respect to existing organizations [in the countryside] is not yet correct; it is still one-sided, stressing the one perspective of the organizations as dominated by the enemy with the result that many land reform teams punished too many Party members and old cadres.”

But in other sections of the report, the older narrative of the enemy as virtually omnipresent in the countryside appears again. For example, despite recognizing the “one-sided” judgment of local party organizations and having attacked “too many” party members during the reorganization, Thằng was still able to describe in positive terms the method of attacking the enemy during the campaign:

Compared with wave 4, this wave [we have] struck against the cruel and despotic landlords harder and more quickly. This is because we learned lessons from the experience from wave 4. Therefore, through propagandizing our policies, through the masses’ speak bitterness sessions, when we saw any person who fit the requirements for a cruel and despotic landlord we promptly arrested him, even though we had not yet held a large peasant meeting. After that, we promptly moved to mobilize the masses to carry out each step of struggle, starting small and expanding out, combining that with the efforts to build forces [in the community]. In many subdistricts, right from the fourth or fifth day, cruel and despotic landlords were arrested, and on the thirteenth day, [cadres] immediately struggled against and tried those landlords who had many serious crimes. As a result
of this method, generally speaking, right from the beginning, we took the initiative to strike the enemy, to raise the movement higher, to generate momentum for the masses and to lower the momentum of the enemy. We also carried out these measures as a result of the special characteristics of the situation during this wave, for which a few features stand out:

According to Hồ Việt Thắng, one important feature of the campaign’s final wave was its coverage of “recently liberated areas” that had not yet passed through rent reduction and where the enemy was “stubborn” than in the old liberated areas. Another characteristic was that the masses were in an “extremely wretched state after having been occupied by the enemy for too long.” This allegedly meant that their “hatred was high.”

Thắng might also have pointed out that wave 5 of the land reform covered the densely populated regions of the Red River delta near the port of Haiphong. For rural elites or State of Vietnam supporters who heard rumors about the land reform and feared being targeted as “cruel despotic landlords,” escape to the South during the period of the 300 days was less difficult because of the proximity to Haiphong. Thắng’s report hints at the problem of too few targets:

The places that went in circles a lot usually did so because, from the beginning, [cadres] did not promptly and strongly repress those saboteurs who were not from the landlord class. As a result, the masses did not dare speak bitterness strongly, and we did not find cruel and despotic landlords. Where people were fooled was always in carrying out a right-deviationist approach to the enemy—more specifically, not strongly repressing the saboteurs. This happened mainly because [cadres] did not grasp the new demand put forward by the Central Committee: repress the active counterrevolutionaries and break apart reactionary organizations. Another factor [leading to the above steps] was that during wave four’s summing-up session, many brigade leaders criticized cadres for repressing recklessly in one direction. As a result, many cadres, whenever they saw saboteurs who were not landlords, or when they were still unsure whether a saboteur were a landlord, would not dare go after them.

Before that impasse, the Central Land Reform Committee Standing Committee promptly straightened out these mistakes. This helped cadres grasp in a more concrete manner the demand for striking the enemy and helped them see more clearly the enemy’s movement. As a result, [cadres] attacked the enemy more forcefully, repressed saboteurs more promptly, and attacked more strongly the cruel despotic landlords and the backbone
elements of the counterrevolutionaries carrying out sabotage and constraining the masses.

Despite this heavy stress on “rightest deviations,” Hồ Việt Thắng was already beginning to give ground and concede to the possibility of “leftist deviations” as a problem of the campaign. However, Thắng expressed that problem in a manner that was still consistent with the Politburo’s characterization of the countryside as full of landlords and spies:

But when cadres struck strongly against the enemy, the enemy often carried out sabotage, leading to the use of torture to make people confess to being members of reactionary organizations. There were places where cadres understood the punishment of cruel and despotic landlords currently in power to mean striking against members of the local puppet administration. So they tended to follow the list of puppet administration members and arrest accordingly.

The report at the 8th Meeting of the Central Land Reform Committee continued to discuss unsatisfactory results of the land reform in this manner, tending to blame the “leftist excesses” committed by cadres as responses to “sophisticated and organized enemy sabotage.” Yet, here and there, cautiously and inconsistently, Thắng also conceded that some aspects of the party’s conception of the rural situation in general and of the party organizations in particular may not have been entirely accurate. But a full-scale dislodgement of the official view seeing “rightist deviations” as the primary danger had not yet occurred. In his report, Thắng still included radicalizing elements similar to those used by the party leaders throughout much of the campaign, especially during the last year. An example is his account of the land reform reinspection:

**REINSPECTION WORK**

**Landlords**

During the land reform, the landlord class, generally speaking, was hit hard. But during the land reform, [cadres] did not yet discover all of the cruel and despotic landlords. During the current wave of land reform re-inspection, [cadres] still uncovered 23 cruel and despotic landlords comprising 13.29% of the number of cruel and despotic landlords found during the land reform [phase]. Even more serious is that there were landlords who had slipped down and were marked as poor peasants.

In addition to those, we found 30 landlords who slipped through the net, of which 10 were cruel and despotic ones, with 4 having been labeled
as middle peasants, one as a poor peasant, and five as rich peasants. As such, we calculated that the total number of landlords [for these subdistricts] makes up 4.4% of the total population, with cruel and despotic landlords comprising 23% of the total number of landlords.

With respect to reactionary organizations, during the land reform, [cadres] had not discovered many. Now, of the 43 subdistricts assigned to the Phú Thọ land reform brigade for re-inspection, 39 were found to have reactionary organizations. Of the cruel and despotic landlords who slipped through the net and of those landlords who resist the law, the majority are in reactionary organizations. They carry out serious acts of sabotage. After the land reform and during the re-inspection, they killed 53 peasants. (18 of those occurred during the re-inspection of the land reform). There were also 74 incidents of arson, 75 incidents of sabotage of production along with many other incidents such as the cutting of telephone wire, the destruction of the railroad, etc.33

Throughout most of April 1956, the discourse in The People continued to mention landlords having “slipped through the net” and the discovery of cases of sabotage—the elements that were typically used by the party leaders to incite cadres to more determined attacks on the regime’s enemies. At some point in the middle of the month, though, the party leaders seem to have decided that the time had come to distance themselves from the campaign’s violence and injustices. On April 21, Politburo member Nguyễn Duy Trinh released what appears to be the party’s first internal directive acknowledging that “leftist” mistakes were more numerous than “rightist” ones. His directive spoke for the first time openly of “many places listening to enemy confessions and using torture to discover those party members who had participated in reactionary organizations.” Now positioning the party leaders as the dedicated advocates of legal due process, “socialist legality” as Khrushchev referred to it at the CPSU 20th Congress, Trinh criticized mass mobilization cadres for “not investigating, researching, and checking documents [used as evidence] carefully.”

Indeed, this was the beginning of the process by which the brunt of the blame for the land reform’s violence would be placed on the land reform apparatus rather than on the top party leaders who conceived of and manipulated the campaign from start to finish.

As for the reason why these mistakes occurred, one factor was the lack of clarity in the political standpoint and thinking of land reform cadres. This lowered their level of political awareness and resulted in substandard work.
They did not grasp firmly the method and policy of constructing the party. But another part [of the reason for these mistakes] was that land reform brigade leaders and interzone leaders lacked closeness in their management of the campaign.34

By the end of June, the Politburo had shifted the public land reform discourse to “leftist errors” as the campaign’s primary problem. On June 25, the Central Land Reform Committee held its 9th meeting, and, following the lead of the Nguyễn Duy Trinh directive of May 21, had begun to adopt the new view.35

A close examination of the campaign’s structure, the type of training that land reform cadres received, the content of land reform reports, and the Politburo’s public discourse about the campaign all suggest the opposite of the official assessment. It was only through the Politburo’s and the land reform brigade leaders’ tight management of the campaign that the remarkable level of violence and injustice had been possible.

From the perspective of Nguyễn Tất Thành and the Politburo, the timing and content of Khrushchev’s secret speech could not have been worse. One day, scholars may be allowed to read the notes of DRV Politburo meetings. I believe that the meetings in March and April of 1956, the two months following Khrushchev’s secret speech, will reveal a sense of derailment with respect to how Thành, Trường Chinh, and other top party leaders had planned to handle the conclusion of the land reform. Their original plan was probably to carry out a 90 percent whitewash of the campaign similar to what Mao had done in China.

The party leaders would have touted the overall success of the land reform and flooded the DRV media with narratives of peasant joy and prosperity. Next to this overwhelming narrative of success would have been official recognition that, here and there, land reform cadres had committed some “mistakes” in their implementation of the party’s “correct” policy. This would have been accompanied by promises to investigate and address those mistakes as Mao had done in China. The party leaders may have planned that, after this burst of praise for the land reform, they would promptly shelve the topic and turn attention to agricultural collectivization and the struggle for national unification.

Khrushchev’s secret speech, because it directly condemned brutal Stalinist methods that were fundamental to the land reform, because it called for party leaders to listen to voices from below, and because it criticized personality cults, put Thành and the Politburo in a position of uncertainty. In this weakened position, the planned 90-percent whitewash (my theory) was no longer safe—a 60-percent whitewash would have to suffice. But the toxic nature of the land
reform campaign meant that even a partial admission of responsibility would prove destabilizing. The fallout would begin a slow chain reaction that would result in a change in party leadership. Thành’s determination to protect the Hồ cult from the contagion of the land reform would require the scapegoating of his loyal lieutenant, Trường Chinh. By October 1956, the DRV’s leading foursome of Thành, Chinh, Phạm Văn Đông, and Võ Nguyên Giáp would begin to come apart, opening up room for the rise of two other Politburo members, Lê Duẩn and Lê Đức Thọ.