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Conclusion

The DRV regime sits at opposite ends of two yardsticks of political legitimacy. The first is a military yardstick, which includes the ability to mobilize troops, to win battles, and to expel a foreign power. The second is a democratic yardstick, which includes the ability to win a free election, to survive in conditions of free speech, and to improve the material and spiritual wellbeing of the governed. When measured by the military yardstick, Nguyễn Tất Thành and his comrades succeeded spectacularly, but when measured by the democratic yardstick, they fell short in many ways. Were he asked privately to defend his record on the democratic front, though, Thành might have replied that the party’s military goals never could have been achieved under “bourgeois democratic” conditions; and the goal of national independence, after eighty years of French subjugation, justified any means.

During and immediately after the period of the Second Indochina War, Western assessments of the DRV regime tended to rely mainly on its military successes. The battlefield was the only place Westerners encountered the DRV because journalists such as David Halberstam, Stanley Karnow, and Neil Sheehan were not allowed to live in and scrutinize North Vietnam. Thus, to a large extent, the success of the DRV regime had to be inferred from the performance of its outstanding soldiers. Battlefield victory and political legitimacy were strongly connected, especially in the thinking of Americans, who had never experienced military defeat leading to occupation. Histories of America’s major wars tended to imply a link between military performance, the justness of the cause, and eventual battlefield success.

This mindset was something noticed by the German émigré scholar Guenter Lewy, a perceptive observer of American culture. Even some leaders of America’s pacifist movement, Lewy observed, celebrated the DRV’s military successes.¹ In his controversial 1978 book on the Second Indochina War, Lewy attempted to refute this connection between military performance and political legitimacy. (One can imagine how his experience as a Jew in 1930s Germany shaped his views of nationalism, the meaning of military prowess, and the question of American military intervention around the world.) Discussing the inferior performance
of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, he wrote, “As history demonstrates abundantly, there is, of course, no necessary connection between the efficiency of an army and the absolute value of the political ideas it serves. The outcome of a military contest has no moral significance.” This was an idea singled out by the influential American historian of Vietnam, David Marr, as especially troubling and as having contributed to Lewy’s failure to draw the “necessary lessons” from the Second Indochina War:

More specifically, he rejects the importance of “abstract ideology,” arguing that there is no necessary connection between the efficiency of an army and the political ideas it serves. Because the German Wehrmacht and the French Foreign Legion fought well even in extreme adversity, he suggests that the Saigon army somehow could have done likewise—thus completely ignoring what he previously accepted was a revolutionary historical context in Vietnam.

Judging from Marr’s writings on Vietnamese history, when he referred to “abstract ideology,” he meant nationalism. In his thinking, the Vietnamese Communist Party had seized the banner of Vietnamese nationalism in 1945 and had never relinquished it. Thành and his successors were able to recruit dedicated followers and motivate them to fight well because the cause of expelling foreigners and unifying the country was simple and just.

Nationalism was an important part of the party’s success. Thành and his comrades took pains to promote themselves as patriots and to denounce Vietnamese political rivals first and foremost as “traitors.” Only internally did the party leaders speak of rivals as being “anti-Bolshevik.” And the DRV regime obviously earned great nationalist credit for their victory over the French. But could that victory have been achieved without the party’s Marxist-Leninist ideology? I believe not. As the war against the French dragged on, Thành and the Politburo found that they needed coercion, sometimes reinforced by terror, to extract the necessary sacrifice from an exhausted population. Soviet and Chinese Communist precedents gave the Politburo a set of institutional mechanisms for that coercion and an ideology, Marxism-Leninism, to justify them.

Explaining the Mass Mobilization Campaign (1953–1956)
The party’s use of coercion and terror climaxed with the mass mobilization campaign from 1953 to 1956. Many scholars have attempted to explain this episode, which is arguably the most sensitive and controversial in the history
of Vietnamese Communism. In their studies of the campaign, Edwin Moise, Christine White, and Andrew Vickerman exhaustively analyze a 1968 history of the land reform produced by the DRV social scientist Trần Phương. His book provides many DRV statistics about the alleged class composition of the countryside as well as some of the alleged regulations of the campaign. The above scholars analyze those statistics and regulations with admirable care. Moise, for example, points out the inherent trouble in the land reform’s redistribution policy, which stated that poor peasants were to receive enough land to raise their holdings close to the village’s per capita average: “This was a very dangerous policy and must have been among the major causes of the errors and illegalities in the later stages of the land reform.” As Moise sensibly points out, because of the “nature of an average,” such a redistribution goal “would require major inroads into the holdings not only of the rich peasants but even of the middle peasants.”

One number, “5.86 percent,” seems to be especially revealing about the nature of the mass mobilization campaign. That number was the Politburo’s figure for the percentage of the population comprising the landlord class. First, it was fifteen times higher than the landlord percentage determined in a 1951 test census conducted in a “typical” district of Nghệ An province. Also, in their 1938 book, The Peasant Question, Trường Chinh and Võ Nguyên had stated plainly that, in Central Vietnam and Tonkin, “there are many villages that do not have landlords—their highest class is rich peasant.” In other words, the landlord ratio of 5.86 percent was a wild exaggeration. Second, the use of the “.86” was obviously an attempt to disguise with pseudoscientific precision the arbitrary nature of the figure, which had been pulled out of thin (Chinese) air. Fourth, the number shows that the party leaders did not take seriously their class demarcation criteria since these should have obviated the need for landlord quotas. Fifth, the decimal “.86” signaled to mass mobilization cadres that they should err high on their landlord numbers—this is another reflection of the Politburo’s fear that too few landlords would be found.

Ultimately, the figure 5.86 percent shows that the so-called errors of the campaign—the enormous number of regular villagers labeled as landlords—were not “errors” but an intended result. This is the conclusion reached by Georges Boudarel, Bertrand de Hartingh, Olivier Tessier, and Alex Thai Vo in their respective studies of the DRV. As de Hartingh wrote in 2003, “Nobody was ready to accept that the “mistakes” were not errors, nor that the cadres had acted exactly as asked to.” I would use a stronger verb than “asked,” though, to describe the Politburo’s treatment of mass mobilization cadres—“pushed” or “coerced” to make “landlords” out of regular peasants strikes me as more realistic. The
method of compelling cadres to carry out “thought reform” before heading into their assigned village was especially effective. This involved having cadres confess to and often write down in an official dossier various preselected “sins against the revolution,” as one DRV writer described it. As Goscha notes, these mostly false confessions put land reform cadres in the weak position of having to “prove” themselves through vigorous attacks on the landlord class and through uncovering (nonexistent) Nationalist Party cells.

In his classic historical fiction account of the land reform, appropriately titled Nightmare (Ác mộng), the former land reform cadre and writer Ngô Ngọc Bogi has a memorable chapter titled “Landlord Ratio” (tỷ lệ địa chủ). In the chapter, the main character’s land reform team meets with their brigade’s “statistics” cadre. The problem is that their team has not found enough landlords in their assigned subdistrict of Quảng Hà. As their statistics cadre explains:

“According to the statistics, Quảng Hà has 1,240 families. On the basis of a landlord ratio of 6 percent, Quảng Hà must have 74.4 landlords. In the entire sub-district, we have only found 58, which means we are still short 16.4 landlords.” During the Brigade statistics meeting the other day, we complained that ‘6 percent landlords is too high for our country.’ The Brigade quickly sent our appeal to higher-ups. They reduced our landlord ratio to 5 percent. I heard a rumor that the [Chinese] advisors did not agree, but that our higher-ups remained determined. If the ratio is 5 percent, then Quảng Hà is short exactly fourteen landlords. In other words, the sub-district needs to have seventy-two landlords. Compared with the 6 percent ratio, we are allowed to reduce our total by 2.4 landlords.”

The imposition of this unrealistic ratio guaranteed that most people targeted as “landlords” in the campaign would be regular community members. Many of the brutal aspects of the land reform, especially the use of torture to elicit confessions, stemmed from this dilemma faced by land-reform cadres.

**Chinese Pressure**

What was the role of Chinese pressure in the land reform? Thành’s original rural policy plan was to follow the orthodox Leninist model of the two-stage revolution. A radical attack on the landlord class and a large-scale redistribution of land to poor peasants would not happen until after independence had been won from the imperialist power, France. Reading between the lines of the party’s reports at their Second Congress in February of 1951, we see a concerted effort to justify a continuation of this classic Leninist two-stage approach. It appears that
the DRV’s Chinese advisors began to promote land reform to their Vietnamese clients soon after arriving in northern Vietnam.

By 1952, the war had reached a point of stalemate. Desperate for military aid, Thành traveled to Moscow in October of that year to ask Stalin for more help. The Soviet leader told his Vietnamese guest, “Comrade Din,” to stop delaying and to carry out land reform as the Chinese had been recommending. Thành complied with Stalin’s order, which meant a sudden deviation from the long-held two-stage model. As we saw, Thành and Trương Chinh attempted to cover up the Moscow impetus for the policy change with some awkward explanations. In Chinh’s case, the cover-up involved changing rural policy comments made in a 1951 speech so that they anticipated more strongly the new move to land reform. Given the amount of blood already spilled in the war, the economic difficulties faced by the DRV, and the desperate need for more aid, the pressure on Thành to accede to Mao’s and Stalin’s wishes by carrying out land reform would have been enormous.

I believe, though, that the DRV’s victory over the French at Điện Biên Phủ in the summer of 1954 must have given Thành some breathing room in his relationship with the Soviets and the Chinese. Having become the best story of the Communist bloc, could the DRV be abandoned by Moscow and Beijing? Moreover, the Soviets and Chinese had wanted a result from the Geneva negotiations and had pressured Thành to accept less than satisfying terms. One of those terms guaranteed democratic freedoms for all Vietnamese and explicitly forbade any state-sponsored repression from either regime. Since the mass mobilization campaign contradicted both the letter and the spirit of the Geneva Accords, which Thành had been pushed to approve, I believe that he could have used those accords to justify delaying the campaign indefinitely. Thus, in the light of the currently available evidence, Thành’s continuation of the land reform after the war seems to suggest true belief in the campaign as an antidote to problems in North Vietnam.

Mass Mobilization as DRV Electoral Strategy?

After Điện Biên Phủ and the Geneva Conference, did the land reform become a means of assuring electoral victory for the party leaders? Following the Geneva Accords, Thành and his comrades in the Politburo took measures to keep the campaign going but to conceal its nature from roving International Control Commission teams. And, as Alex Thái Vo points out, during the 300-day period of free movement following the accords, the Politburo kept the land reform away from coastal areas where people had the easiest route out of North Vietnam.
In this way, the campaign could be continued with less risk of the DRV being flagged for Geneva Accords violations and without encouraging more emigration to the South. Thành also called for a campaign of public complaint over repressive actions taken by their rival regime in Saigon, hoping to keep the narrative of Geneva Accords violations focused on the region below the 17th parallel, South Vietnam.¹⁰

Why did Thành and the Politburo stick with their policy of mass mobilization? In his 2003 book, de Hartingh describes the official DRV explanation of the land reform’s “errors” to National Assembly members in December of 1956. At that time, the party leaders provided two reasons for what had happened. The first was the application in Vietnam of the Chinese experience. The second was the rush to finish the campaign before the proposed 1956 national elections—pushed to move quickly, cadres allegedly lacked the time to discern between friend and foe.

Intriguingly, de Hartingh argues that the proposed national elections were a motivating factor behind the land reform’s violence. In his view, Thành and the Politburo feared that many Northerners might vote for the anticommunist leader of the South, Ngô Đình Diệm, “the election’s other possible winner.”¹¹ Since I do not believe that the DRV leaders viewed the elections as possible—Diệm explicitly rejected this measure—I disagree with de Hartingh’s theory that the party leaders had “miscalculated” on the elections and that the land reform had evolved into a round of repression to ensure electoral victory. However, it is worth considering the measures that the party leaders were willing to take in their efforts to depict the land reform’s violence as stemming from honest mistakes. Basically, as de Hartingh shows, the Politburo was willing to acknowledge openly that their approach to the “free elections” would have involved a campaign of mass repression to “strike out all elements it was not sure of.”¹²

The Economic Justification

Did Thành and his lieutenants believe that “poor peasants,” if only given land, would provide a great boost in agricultural production? In 1938, when Trường Chinh and Võ Nguyên Giáp wrote their book, The Peasant Question, they probably did believe this to be true. Fifteen years later, after seven years’ experience managing the DRV economy, Chinh, Giáp, Thành, and other party leaders must have had doubts. The party’s policy of temporary land redistribution, which had been carried out since seizing power in 1945, had yielded no promising results. According to the regime’s own questionable statistics, over half the total “feudal landlord land” in northern Vietnam had already been distributed by the time
the land reform began in 1953. As the Vietnamese scholar Đặng Phong points out, during the land reform, only about a quarter of the total feudal landlord land was seized and redistributed.\textsuperscript{13}

Similarly, there is no proof that poor-peasant soldiers at Điện Biên Phủ were more motivated to fight because of the promise of land reform, as is commonly asserted in official DRV justifications of the campaign. DRV soldiers appear to have fought no less bravely or effectively during the pre–land reform battles such as the 1950 Border Campaign, the Battle of Hòa Bình (1951), and the Battle of Nà Sản (1952).

Moreover, the ultimate goal of the DRV leaders was not a bustling small-farmer economy but one based on the large, modern collective farms of the Soviet Union. This, in their view, was the solution to the problem of agricultural production. Still, the land reform, in theory, was supposed to be a transitional phase that provided an economic boost. It would help lay the conditions of plenty in which the shift to agricultural collectivization would occur.

In his excellent article on the land reform, Olivier Tessier argues that the reform did have a “positive impact on production and on the living standards” of the DRV people. The evidence for this alleged production boost is DRV statistics that seem especially questionable. In 1954, the DRV government claimed that its total rice production was 2.5 million tons—in 1959, they boasted of having produced 5.19 million tons.\textsuperscript{14} Are we to believe the DRV claim that its rice production, despite the chaos of the land reform, the departure of 850,000 people, and the disruptions of land reform and agricultural collectivization, had more than doubled in only five years? Assuming that a boost had occurred, it may have resulted more from the cessation of war than from land redistributions. The rapid move to collectivization after land reform suggests that the party leaders, in reality, did not expect land redistributions to provide any meaningful productivity increase. I doubt one happened.

\textit{Winning Over the Poor-Peasant Majority?}

Was the mass mobilization a campaign to win over the poor-peasant majority? In their public justifications, Thành and the Politburo claimed that this was the case. But three aspects of the land reform cast doubt on this justification. First was the fact that an important part of the campaign was the raising of agricultural-tax yield estimates. Redistributed land that was, in theory, supposed to win the hearts of poor peasants was accompanied by a tax so onerous that many peasants were reluctant to receive land. Second is, again, the party leaders’ rapid move to collectivization. Belief that providing land to peasants would win their support implies
that taking that land away would result in a loss of that support. The move to collectivization indicates that the party leaders placed little value on the peasant goodwill that land redistribution was supposed to earn for the regime. Third, most accounts of the land reform paint a picture of the campaign as a terrifying experience for the entire village—poor included. One of the tasks of the land reform cadres was to lead the crowd in cheers after a local member of the community had been shot as a “landlord.” Obviously, the DRV leaders felt that peasants could not be trusted to display the required joy of their own volition.15

In light of the available evidence, the most convincing explanation for Thành and the Politburo’s motivation in putting northern Vietnam through mass mobilization is that offered by the French Communist, Georges Boudarel. He worked for and lived in the DRV from 1949 until 1964. In his 1991 book on DRV intellectuals, Boudarel argued that the land reform campaign was “essentially political” and “aimed at the radical destruction of all potential oppositional forces more than at economic or social goals.” Pushing Boudarel’s explanation further, I argue that the mass mobilization campaign was, under the guise of class warfare, a massive and thorough round of terror imposed on the entire DRV countryside, including poor peasants.

“Awakening” the Northern People

Why did Thành and his comrades feel that such a campaign of repression was necessary? In tracing the party leaders’ internal directives during the war, we see a steady buildup of frustration over the difficulties in mobilizing the required contribution from people in the countryside. While recognizing the difficulties and disruptions caused by the war, Thành, Trương Chinh, and other Politburo members may have quietly raged over some actions of Vietnamese in the countryside. Why did many villagers attempt to hide their rice instead of willingly giving it to the DRV state? Why did some villagers attempt to sell their rice to the French when it was so badly needed by DRV soldiers? Why did so many Vietnamese peasants leave enormous areas of paddy uncultivated? How could these things happen when soldiers were suffering and dying on the battlefield to win the country’s independence? Why was tax collection so difficult? Why couldn’t villagers forget their local problems, pull together, and dedicate themselves entirely to serving the war effort? Why couldn’t local cadres motivate peasants to raise production? These questions are implied by many of the party’s internal directives over the course of the war.

It is possible that Thành and his lieutenants thought that too many people in the countryside had not yet fully “awakened” (giác ngộ) and committed
themselves to the cause of DRV victory. In his explanation of the land reform, the DRV historian Nguyễn Khắc Viên argued that, for poor peasants, the campaign was a form of “shock” treatment. It forced them to awaken, to develop a class consciousness, and to overthrow their local oppressors.\textsuperscript{16} I interpret the campaign as a type of terrifying “shock” treatment aimed at rural society in general.

The message was that nobody could stand outside of the party’s agenda. Nobody was safe. The state could make “spies,” “Nationalist Party members,” and “cruel despotic landlords” out of dedicated Communist Party members, courageous Điên Biên Phủ soldiers, loyal parents of DRV bureaucrats, and patriotic leaders of local DRV mass organizations. Similarly, no sacred institution such as the family, no source of village solidarity such as the local đinh (meeting house), and no humane legal principle such as the right to due process could protect a person targeted in the campaign. Most of all, though, the campaign showed rural communities that the DRV state could make facts and truth mean nothing.

Knowing that agricultural collectivization would not be welcomed by most peasants—after all, Thành had lived in the Soviet Union from 1934 to 1938—he may have viewed this experience of terror and violence as a means of preparing the countryside to accept this radical change. Benedict Kerkvliet, in his history of agricultural collectivization in Vietnam, describes the process as a more peaceful one relative to that of the Bolsheviks in the Soviet Union. “Authorities in Vietnam rarely used brute force to herd people into cooperatives, punish those who broke rules, or confiscate their possessions.”\textsuperscript{17} I agree. But, after the land reform campaign’s elimination of local leaders, its pressure on community members to denounce each other, its destruction of local meeting houses and temples, and its spectacular public trials and executions, what was left of North Vietnamese rural society to resist collectivization?\textsuperscript{18}

Completed by the end of 1960, collectivization fulfilled a dream held by party leaders since the 1930s and, by affirming the DRV’s membership in the Communist bloc, assured Soviet military and economic aid. It also solved mobilization problems that had arisen during the First Indochina War. As Trương Chinh had expressed in February of 1950, “During this period of intense struggle, we must announce that the people’s labor, property, tools, and materials are the Government’s to use. The Government has complete power to use [these things] to the benefit of the resistance struggle.”\textsuperscript{19} Collectivization made that totalitarian principle a reality by transferring virtually the entire DRV food supply directly into the hands of the state. Now the DRV’s rural population had to ask the state for rice instead of vice versa. This gave the party leaders tremendous leverage
over the rural population. Thanh and his comrades had found during the First Indochina War that no amount of leverage could be too much in war.

The close chronological alignment between the completion of agricultural collectivization in the DRV and the party’s move to “armed struggle” in the South (1960) deserves more appreciation. The problem of agricultural production and rice supply during the First Indochina War had placed severe pressure on the party leaders, threatening the viability of a promising war effort. They were determined that things would be different when they mobilized manpower and rice for the next war.