



Agrarian Policies in North Vietnam during the Resistance War, 1945-1953

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AGRARIAN POLICIES IN NORTH VIỆT NAM DURING THE RESISTANCE
WAR, 1945-1953

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ABSTRACT

In a fifteen-year period from 1945 to 1960, the Vietnamese Communist Party implemented various agrarian policies designed to break the power of the Vietnamese traditional village elite, to distribute wealth from the elite to the poor, and to form a new class of leaders in order to consolidate power in North Việt Nam. Over the years, many historians have written about these policies, but most have generally concentrated on the official Land Reform, which was implemented between 1953 to 1958, and thus have neglected the significance of the years from 1945 to 1953. Based on new sources and interviews, this thesis examines the Communist Party's ideological assessments, the laws and regulations enforced, and the social and class struggles mobilized during the period from 1945 to 1953. The purpose is to exemplify the fundamental importance of the period as the key stepping-stone in the process of land reform and consolidating of political dominance in rural North Việt Nam. Situated in a weak political and economic position, the Communist Party's initial land policies were conservatively applied to appease the interests and gain the support of both the rich and the poor. However, as the political, economic and military condition improved, land policies began to take a critical shift, provoking intensive implementation of class struggle necessary to abolish the Vietnamese traditional elite and consolidate power.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Alex-Thái Đình Võ was born in Quảng Ngãi, Việt Nam in 1983. Because of Việt Nam's social, economic and political oppressive policies directed against people of the former regime, in 1990, Alex-Thái, along with his family immigrated to the United States. He grew up in El Monte, California. Alex-Thái graduated from the University of California, Berkeley in 2005 with a B.A. degree in Political Science. He started his Master's Degree in Asian Studies in Fall 2007. From July 2008 to July 2009, Alex-Thái conducted research in Việt Nam on the subject of land reform in North Việt Nam during the period from 1945 to 1960. Having finished his studies, he will be returning to Việt Nam to work in the field of education.

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National Library in Hà Nội, the Thái Nguyên Provincial Archive in Thái Nguyên, and the Thái Nguyên Provincial Library in Thái Nguyên.

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INTRODUCTION

During the Franco-Vietnam War from 1945 to 1954, the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) attempted to create a multi-level administrative system, aimed at strengthening their support among the rural population in the struggle against the French, in consolidating power, and in constructing communism.¹ However, such aims met many obstacles and difficulties, due to the transitions from war to peace, and from colonialism to communism. In the process of these transitions, it implemented various agrarian reform policies aimed at breaking the power of the Vietnamese traditional village elite, forming a new class of leaders, and redistributing land and other forms of wealth to create a new class that had no property.²

Over the years, there have been many discussions about the implementation and effects of these reform policies. These discussions have typically focused on the period from 1953 to 1958, when the Land Reform Proper program (Chính Sách Cải Cách Ruộng Đất) was officially put into practice, and later amended. However, most of these discussions have neglected the fundamental significance of the period between 1945 and 1953 as a key stepping-stone in the process of land reform and consolidation of political supremacy in rural North Việt Nam. Using recently released internal communist party documents, archival documents, Vietnamese newspapers and periodicals, memoirs, and interviews, this paper hopes to chronicle the developmental steps taken by the ICP between 1945 and 1953 to set the foundation for the implementation of the Land Reform Proper campaign in the Democratic Republic of

¹ Việt Minh, or the League for the Independence of Vietnam, was a communist led collaborative nationalist resistance movement against French colonial rule, within which the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP)—later the Vietnam Workers' Party (VWP), played the dominant role. From here on, the term will be used with the understanding that the Vietnamese communist party played the dominant role in all aspects of decision making.

² Hoàng Văn Chí, ed. *The New Class in North Việt Nam* (Saigon: Công Dân, 1958).

Việt Nam (DRV). The years between 1945 and 1953, to a greater extent than the traditionally recognized years from 1953 to 1958, was the time when the essential basis of the Vietnamese revolution was established, when the DRV implemented its socio-economic policies, eradicated the dominant power structure of the former regime, and consolidated the political position needed to sustain itself.

This thesis concentrates primarily on the political opportunism (accommodation) of the state-run program and its effects upon village cultural, social, and political conditions. It addresses the ICP's internal ideological assessments, the debates and events that helped to create the land reform campaign, the laws and regulations that were enforced, and the social and class struggles that were mobilized to garner support. The policies advanced during the years from 1945 to 1953, heretofore de-emphasized or ignored, illuminate critical developments leading to the implementation of the Land Reform Proper between 1953 and 1956, and show that the progression of land reform in North Việt Nam during this period was instigated from the top down.

This research is presented in four chapters. The first chapter provides a brief introduction to the methodology and sources employed in this work. This includes a review of prior literature on the topic to point out questions that warrant further research. The second and third chapter thoroughly analyzes the much-neglected land reform policies during the period from 1945 to 1953. Chapter two addresses the Vietnamese Communist Party's land policy during the resistance period between 1945 and 1949. Chapter three examines the Party's land policy during the revolutionary resistance period from 1950 to 1953. Chapter four closely examines the process of mobilizing the peasants, known as "ba cùng," literally translated as "three together," to consider whether land reform grew from the bottom, or was imposed from the top. The conclusion assesses the bridging relationship between the developmental land

reform policies and their leading up to the full implementation of the official Land Reform Proper program.

CHAPTER ONE

METHODOLOGY, SOURCES, AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Primary Sources

This thesis is based on archival and library research, in-depth interviews, internal party documents, and other materials related to the topic of land reform. The archival research was carried out during a nine-month period from October 2008 to July 2009 at the National Archives III in Hà Nội, Việt Nam (Trung tâm Lưu trữ Quốc gia III, hereafter abbreviated as TTLTQG3) and the Thái Nguyên Provincial Archive (Trung tâm Lưu trữ tỉnh Thái Nguyên). The TTLTQG3 is the prime source, particularly worthy because of its strategic location at the regime's center, and the accessibility of documents and information from 1945 to the present. The Thái Nguyên Provincial Archive was chosen as a place of reference because it is located where the land reform campaign was first actually implemented. The archival files include official and unofficial administrative documents, records, photographs, maps, graphs and charts, lists, and other valuable artifacts. The contents of the files range from a single page to several hundreds of pages, and the page numbering within these files is often inconsistent. Files were obtained through being provided with a list of items, systematized by a call number and a title, from which requests for access could be selected. None of this catalog information, however, has been entered into a computerized database; thus, requests for documents were tedious in that they must include the file number and its corresponding title exactly as it appears in the list. Even more problematic, documents requested are based solely on the titles, since these institutions do not provide synopses of the documents themselves. It is almost by chance if the requested source is later deemed relevant. The multiple complications of this system make it difficult to cite documents using any standard format. Therefore,

to be as consistent as possible with these archives' filing method, the references in this paper include the call number, title, author, intended recipient, place, and date to specify exactly which document is under consideration.

Library research was done at the National Library in Hà Nội (Thư viện Quốc gia Hà Nội, abbreviated as TVQGHN), Hà Nội Library (Thư viện Hà Nội), and Thái Nguyên Provincial Library (Thư viện tỉnh Thái Nguyên), which were chosen for their locations and the availability of particular sources for this research. Sources obtained from the libraries include books, magazines, newspapers, periodicals, documents, research publications, maps, graphs, and charts. The majority of the sources used for this thesis are books and newspapers. Newspaper articles are referenced as follows: the newspapers' name, the date published, the article's title, and page number.

This research also relied on in-depth interviews and conversations. The aim was to have a more thorough understanding of the Land Reform Program and its effects from first-hand interpretations. In order to do this, a set of questions were developed in order to delve into interviewees' experiences of the reform policies, paying particular attention to the process of mass mobilization. Furthermore, these questions led to information about the lifestyle and mood at the village level. However, the questions tended to concentrate on the interviewees' experiences during the year from 1953 to 1958.

Interviews and conversations were conducted in the provinces Hà Nội, Hà Đông, Thái Nguyên, Thanh Hoá, Thái Bình, Ninh Bình, Bắc Ninh, Hải Dương, and Hưng Yên because these places were directly affected by the Land Reform Program. Altogether, there were a total of 20 interviews and conversations from these provinces, including an equal mixture of male and female informants. The research was conducted according to human safety guidelines. The informants were chosen on the basis of referrals from people who knew them. The referrers often facilitate the initial

introductions in order to help ease the transactions between the informants and interviewer. Informants were fully informed of the research objectives and their roles and rights as participants through both verbal and written notification and consent in the Vietnamese language. Only those who agreed to participate after being fully informed of the objectives were interviewed. The interviewer often stayed with the informants for an average period of 2 to 3 days in the attempt to establish rapport.

Due to the high degree of sensitivity of this research topic in Việt Nam, the data were recorded entirely by note-taking—during or after the interview—to avoid causing unintended risks and discomfort to the informants. The informant’s identities were concealed by the use of pseudonyms, in accord with rules for the protection of human subjects. Interviews and conversations are cited as follows: informant’s pseudonym, place of interview, and date of interview.

Wherever possible, this thesis provides Vietnamese names and words following modern Vietnamese orthography. Translation, particularly of literary sources, is always a challenge; thus, poems and proverbs are footnoted with the original Vietnamese. Explanations of the terms used are found in the glossary. The author takes full responsibility for any unintended mistakes in the translation.

Literature Review

Given the logistical difficulties of accessing information from North Việt Nam during the war-torn period from 1954 to 1975, and the rigorous prohibitions against researching the topic thereafter, there have not been many scholarly works dealing specifically and thoroughly with the Land Reform. What follows is a review of the most prominent publications, which exemplify the history of the debate and emphasize the need for further in-depth review of the event.

One of the earliest and most prominent writings on the topic was Hoàng Văn Chí's 1962 political memoir entitled *From Colonialism to Communism: a Case Study of North Việt Nam*, which describes North Việt Nam from 1940 to 1955, during the transition from French colonial rule to communism. Land Reform was a major topic in this work, which has since served as the most influential source for the bloodbath theory, used by American policymakers to justify American involvement in Việt Nam.³ Foremost, it must be noted that the author of this work considered himself a Vietnamese nationalist, who lived through much of the period that he wrote about, first as a non-Communist member of the Việt Minh resistance for the nationalist cause of abolishing French colonial power from his motherland, then as an unwilling participant in the land reform program. Mistrusting the Việt Minh's leadership and policies, Hoàng, along with other Vietnamese, fled from North Việt Nam to South Việt Nam in April of 1955 and joined Ngô Đình Diệm's government. Displeased with the leadership of Ngô Đình Diệm, he requested reassignment to the Vietnamese Embassy in New Delhi, India. It was there that he obtained a grant of US\$2,000 from the Congress of Cultural Freedom in France to produce his work on Land Reform in Việt Nam.⁴ Given this background, it may be expected that his narration and analysis on the Land Reform comes with anecdotes of first-hand experience, but probably also with anti-communist sentiment.

Based on personal first-hand experience, the book was written not as a definitive history of the Vietnamese revolution, but rather as a description of the social implications of the revolution. It placed great emphasis on the ideologocial developments and the process of implementing land reform. Hoàng sought to explain the process through which the Communists established collectivism in the North Việt

³ The theory was based on the idea that a military withdrawal from Việt Nam would result in a bloodbath, in which countless Vietnamese would be killed by the North Vietnamese communist regime.

⁴ Hoàng Văn Chí, *Duy Văn Sử Quan*. [Humanism]. (USA: Canh Nam Publisher, 1990.)

Nam countryside. He was not so much concerned with the economic aspects of Communist agricultural policy as he was with the psychological and political aspects, arguing that each phase of this policy was an essential step toward the objective of liquidating the landowning class and creating a dictatorship over the peasantry. The core of the book is the author's analysis of four major aspects of the social revolution in Việt Nam between 1950 and 1956: first, the new system of taxation introduced in 1950-51, which was an imitation of the Chinese model; second, the thought-reform campaign of 1953-54; third, the various stages of land reform, which wiped out all traces of feudalism between 1953-1956; fourth, the 'rectification of errors,' which followed the excesses of land reform, leading to Việt Nam's version of the 'hundred flowers'⁵ and their wilting through the Nhân-Văn Giai-Phẩm dissident affair.⁶ He paid greater attention to the terror, violence, and indiscriminate suffering caused by the Việt Minh policies than to the ideological motives underlying them. In his narration, the author relied greatly on two main sources of information: North Vietnamese newspapers and periodicals, and his own personal experiences. Given the author's personal experience and the book's political subjectivity, the book cannot avoid the question of the author's bias, and possible misrepresentation of facts and information. Hence, more investigation is necessary to verify the validity of his account.

⁵ Hundred Flowers Campaign. 08 June 2010.

<http://www.bookrags.com/wiki/Hundred_Flowers_Campaign>. The Hundred Flowers Campaign refers to a brief interlude in the People's Republic of China from 1956-1957 during which the Chinese Communist Party authorities encouraged a variety of views and solutions to ongoing problems, launched under the slogan: "Let a hundred flowers bloom, let the hundred schools of thought contend." The campaign was accused of being a political trap, as Mao Zedong allegedly persecuted those who had views different from the party. Following the failure of this campaign, an ideological crackdown re-imposed Maoist orthodoxy in public expression.

⁶ Hoàng Văn Chí, *Trăm Hoa Đua Nở Trên Đất Bắc* [Hundreds Flowers Competing to Bloom in the North] (Congress of Cultural Freedom: Saigon, 1959); Tường, Năng Tiên. 'Từ Nguyễn Hữu Đang đến Phạm Hồng Sơn' [From Nguyen Huu Dang to Pham Hong Son]. September 2003. 01 May 2008. <<http://tuongnangtien.wordpress.com/2010/05/14/t%E1%BB%AB-nguy%E1%BB%85n-h%E1%BB%AFu-dang-d%E1%BA%BFn-ph%E1%BA%A1m-h%E1%BB%93ng-s%C6%A1n/>>.

Bernard B. Fall's works followed an interpretation similar to that of Hoàng Văn Chí, estimating that about 50,000 people were executed during the campaign. This interpretation also helped constitute the bloodbath argument, which the U.S. and Saigon governments used as an important propaganda tool against North Việt Nam. Like many authors of the period, Fall's analysis of the program was gravely limited by his inability to read Vietnamese, and by his failure to conduct research using original, authoritative Vietnamese sources. Subject to the processes of translation and summarization, his interpretations of important documents could have been distorted by substantial influences from the U.S. or the South Vietnamese governments.⁷

Gareth Porter, in his monograph, *The Myth of the Bloodbath: North Việt Nam's Land Reform Reconsidered*, published in 1972, challenged the notion of mass killings in North Viet Nam's Land Reform by Hoàng Văn Chí, Bernard Fall, and others. In contrast to the usual assertions of tens or hundreds of thousands killed, or the exact totals of 500,000 executed and 500,000 who died in slave labor claimed by Richard Nixon, Gareth Porter argued that those figures were completely unfounded, and that in reality, probably only a few hundred people died.⁸ Porter's argument, however, was written for the purpose of challenging the main rationale offered by U.S. President Richard Nixon in 1969 for continuing the Việt Nam War, and thus overreacted against the assertions he intended to refute. He vehemently argued against the notion that there could be a communist "bloodbath" in South Việt Nam after the U.S. withdrew its forces, without objectively acknowledging such a possibility. His argument was based on insufficient documents or evidence. This is especially telling when he continued to challenge the bloodbath argument in 1976-77, rejecting early accounts of the mass killings by the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia. Together with George Hildebrand, he

⁷*The Viet-Minh Regime* (1954); *The Two Vietnams* (1963); *Viet-Nam Witness, 1953-66* (1966).

⁸ Porter, Gareth, *The Myth of the Bloodbath: North Vietnam's Land Reform Reconsidered* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), p.37-50.

wrote a book, *Cambodia: Starvation and Revolution*, which accepted the Pol Pot regime's rationale for the deportation of millions of people from Phnom Penh and other cities.⁹ Thus, his arguments are subject to question.

The most comparative study of the subject during the pre-renovation era (1986) was Edwin E. Moise's 1983 comparative analysis of *Land Reform in China and North Việt Nam: Consolidating the Revolution at the Village Level*. Taking on the task of comparing Chinese land reform with that of North Việt Nam, the author viewed the reform in both countries as primarily a political movement, to eliminate political competitors and opponents of the revolution. The book operated on the assumption that any authentic social revolution will always involve the mass mobilization of the poor, to overthrow the traditional elite in favor of a new and presumably more egalitarian order. Information about Việt Nam was based on very limited, yet best available at the time, secondary and newspaper sources.

Benedict J. T. Kerkvliet and Mark Selden's 1998 article "Land Transformations in China and Việt Nam," similarly explores land reform and collectivization in both China and Việt Nam.¹⁰ Land reform was seen as the mechanism that eliminated tenancy and hired labor, equalized land ownership within villages, broke the power of the dominant landed classes, and consolidated the position of the Communist Party at the village level. Collectivization transferred the control of land from rural households to local authorities, thus increasing the scale of cultivation while restricting household production. The state then, in response to starvation in the 1980s, permitted greater economic liberty, by relaxing controls over agricultural production, prices, labor, and accumulation by granting households

⁹ Sophal, Ear. 'Romanticizing the Khmer Revolution.' 20 Nov. 2007. <<http://www.csua.berkeley.edu/~sophal/romanticize.pdf>>.

¹⁰ Kerkvliet, J. T. Benedict, Mark Selden, "Land Transformations in China and Vietnam," in *The China Journal*, 1998 (40).

contractual rights to cultivate small plots of land. The article explores the driving forces behind those transformations. Its central theme is the tension between the central state and local cadres and households with respect to ownership, production, and control over land and labor.

A more contemporary examination of the process is Phạm Quang Minh's 2004 article,¹¹ "Caught in the Middle: Local Cadres in Hải Dương Province," which examines the role of the local Communist Party cadres (members of the People's Councils, People's Committees, Party cells, land cooperatives, mass organizations, and heads of villages), and how the Vietnamese Communist Party leadership dealt with problems regarding these cadres in Hải Dương Province during three broad periods: land reform in the 1950s; collectivization from the 1950s to the 1980s; and de-collectivization from the 1980s onwards. The author argues that there was a large gap between the central government and local cadres in the realization of party policy because local cadres faced conflicts with local villagers when trying to carry out central policies while also representing their communities.

In 1986, the Communist government of Việt Nam initiated *Đổi Mới* [renovation], a vague program to reform its economic structure and allow for more free-market enterprise.¹² Though not articulating a policy of increased political liberty, the Party has nonetheless tacitly permitted more personal freedoms than in the past. Consequently, *Đổi Mới* created an opportunity for a modest (re)examination of the Land Reform Program by both foreign scholars and local intellectuals.

¹¹ Phạm Quang Minh, "Caught in the Middle: Local Cadres in Hải Dương Province," in *Beyond Hanoi: Local Government in Vietnam*, eds. by Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet and David G. Marr. (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2004), p. 90-109; Phạm Quang Minh's other major work on Land Reform is entitled *Zwischen Theorie und Praxis: Agrarpolitik in Vietnam seit 1945* [Between Theory and Practice: Agrarian Politic in Vietnam since 1945]. (Berlin: Logos Berlin, 2003.)

¹²"*Đổi Mới*" or Renovation, was, strictly speaking, purely economic reforms initiated by the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in 1986. Nonetheless, the Communist government tacitly permitted much greater personal freedoms than in the past.

Accessibility to party archives was still discouraged; however, the loosening of the governmental grip on the northern countryside as a site for ethnographic research has created opportunities to gather oral historical data on Land Reform.¹³ This loosening of censorship in Việt Nam, coupled with the emergence of a small overseas community of northern political refugees, gave rise to more critical reexaminations and representations of the subject in the form of Vietnamese fiction and memoirs. Examples include Dương Thu Hương's *Paradise of the Blind* [Những thiên đường mù, 1988], Tạ Duy Anh's "The Broken Curse" [Bước qua lời nguyền], Lê Minh Khuê's "A Small Tragedy" [Bi kịch nhỏ], Ngô Ngọc Bội's *Nightmare* [Ác mộng], Đào Thắng's *The Sugar Cane River* [Dòng sông mía, 2004], Bùi Tín's *Hồ Chí Minh: Memoirs of a North Vietnamese Colonel* [Hoa xuyên tuyết], Vũ Thư Hiên's memoir, *Darkness in the Daytime* [Đêm giữa ban ngày], and Trần Dần's diary, *Notes 1954-1960* [Ghi 1954-1960], all of which are forbidden inside the country. The most recent is To Hoai's *Three Others* [Ba người khác], a novel based on the author's own experience as a cadre who helped carry out the reform policies. Through the novel, the author directly revealed the chaotic, divisive, and murderous outcomes of the infamous Land Reform. It had been written fourteen years earlier, but was kept from general circulation due to its graphic subject matter and politically 'incorrect' point of view. It was finally published in the fall of 2006, and, with its release, spawned a riveting forum for the discussion and reexamination of the historical event.

¹³ Hy Van Luong, *Revolution in the Village: Tradition and Transformation in North Vietnam, 1925-1988*. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press; Shaun Malarny, 2002); Malarney, Shuan Kingsley, *Cultural Ritual and Revolution in Vietnam* (London: Routledge-Curzon, 2002); Kenneth A.S. MacLean, "The Arts of Disclosure: Peasant-Bureacrats, Hisotriogrpahy, and State Socialism in ViệtNam" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 2005.)

CHAPTER TWO
THE VIETNAMESE COMMUNIST PARTY'S LAND POLICY DURING THE
UNITED FRONT RESISTANCE (1945-1949)

Far from the common narrative that land reform was the Indochinese Communist Party's (Đông Dương Đảng Cộng Sản; ICP)¹⁴ ultimate response to the desire of the peasants to rid themselves from socio-economic injustices, land reform in North Việt Nam was an economic, social, and political reform program implemented from the top down, for the purpose of reconstructing Việt Nam's most fundamental level of social organization to consolidate the ICP's economic and political power. Manipulating the socio-political circumstances of the time, the ICP put into practice land reform policies that lasted approximately 15 years, from 1945-1960. These policies can be considered in four distinct, successive phases: the resistance period of 1945 to 1953, the Land Reform Proper of 1953 to 1956, the 'correction of errors' campaign of 1956 to 1958, and the collectivization of agriculture of 1958 to 1960. This thesis addresses the land reform policy developments during the resistance years between 1945 and 1953, focusing on the initial steps that led to the restructuring of the agrarian regime rural.

Soon after capturing political control of North Việt Nam in the fall of 1945, the ICP established the revolutionary government known as the Democratic Republic of Việt Nam, and began rapidly spreading its influence by exerting domestic policies throughout regions under its immediate control. The most urgent domestic dilemma facing the ICP was the widespread famine that killed an estimated 400,000 to 2

¹⁴ From 1930-1945, the communist party that played the dominant role in the nationalist resistance was known as the Indochinese Communist Party; from 1945-1951, there was no formal name, but only euphemisms like "the Party" (Đảng); from 1951 to 1976, the Việt Nam Workers' Party; and from 1976 onward, the Vietnamese Communist Party.

million people in 1944-1945.¹⁵ Alleviating the famine became the most pressing economic objective in 1945, leading to calls for an increase in the level of production. Initially, the ICP pushed for the confiscation of lands belonging to French colonialists and Vietnamese ‘traitors,’ who were those landowners deemed to have gained their wealth and fortune by collaborating with the colonial regime.¹⁶ These lands, along with confiscated village-owned communal lands (công điền), were nationalized, sold (phát mại), and redistributed among the poor and landless peasants. On September 3, 1945, Hồ Chí Minh, president of the DRV, issued a decree (sắc lệnh) encouraging the population to increase its agricultural production.¹⁷ That was followed by a decree on October 26, 1945, abolishing the head tax and excise taxes, and reducing the land tax by 20%, with a complete tax exemption for flooded areas. A number of other taxes were subsequently introduced to finance the DRV government and the resistance effort. On November 20, 1945, a government directive forced all landowners (điền chủ) to reduce rents on land by 25%, cancel all secondary rents (tô phụ), and postpone all debts owed by tenants since before the August Revolution (Cách Mạng Tháng Tám).¹⁸ To start taking command of the rural areas and enforcing its regulations, on November 22, 1945, the DRV issued decree 63/SL,¹⁹ defining steps to establish local administrative organizations [Administrative Committee (Ủy Ban Hành Chính), People’s Council (Hội Đồng Nhân Dân), and People’s Committee (Ủy Ban Nhân

¹⁵ ‘Những nhiệm vụ cấp bách của nhà nước Việt Nam Dân Chủ Cộng Hoà’ [The urgent tasks of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam states]. ĐCSVN, vol. 8, pp. 1-3; There are no exact data regarding the number of deaths due to starvation. Various sources have made estimates as low as 400,000, while Hồ Chí Minh estimated 2 million in his declaration of independence from France in 1945.

¹⁶ Trần Phương, ed., *Cách mạng ruộng đất ở Việt Nam* [The land revolution in Vietnam] (Hà Nội: NXB Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1968), p. 167-170.

¹⁷ Lâm Quang Huyền, *Vấn Đề Ruộng Đất ở Việt Nam* [Land issues in Vietnam] (Hà Nội: NXBKHXH, 2007), p. 56.

¹⁸ Viện Sử Học, *Việt Nam: những sự kiện lịch sử (1945-1975)* [Việt Nam: historical events (1945-1975)] (Việt Nam: NXBGD, 2002), p. 19.

¹⁹ The “SL” is the abbreviation denote for “sắc lệnh,” which is “decree” in Vietnamese. It goes together with the regulation number to help differentiate from other forms of administrative regulations such as directives, circulars, communiqués, etc.

Dân)] throughout the country.²⁰ These administrative organizations acted as the executive arms of the ICP, regulating policies and mediating conflicts between the landowners and peasants. However, restricted by unfavorable military and political conditions, during this period the agrarian policies were enforced only in ICP controlled areas, especially in the vicinity of Interzone IV (Thanh Hoá and Nghệ An provinces) and Interzone Việt Bắc (Phú Thọ and Thái Nguyên provinces), the ICP's stronghold in the northern uplands.²¹

By June of 1946, according to an ICP resolution, the impoverished rural conditions had somewhat improved. The area of cultivated land had increased by 130%, making a more equitable distribution of food supplies and allocation of land among the peasants possible, thereby reviving production.²² This brought significant relief to the peasants, both from the famine itself and from the landowner's control. However, class tensions and dissent also arose from these improvements, due to many errors committed by extremist cadres. Their inability to comprehend social differentiation and the class structure often led to unwarranted discrimination, and the indictment of intellectuals, capitalists, and wealthy bourgeois as reactionaries. These errors often occurred even when the majority of landowners and rich peasants, according to the Party's assessment, had "sided with the nationalist movement against

²⁰Viện Sử Học, *Việt Nam: những sự kiện lịch sử (1945-1975)* [Việt Nam: historical events (1945-1975)] (Việt Nam: NXBGD, 2002), p. 20.

²¹ For the location of the provinces in relation to the Interzones, please refer to Illustration 2.1 and Table 2.1 on page 16 and 17.

²² 'Nghị quyết của toàn kỳ đại biểu khoá đại' [Resolution by the Annual Extended Delegation], 21-26 June, 1946. ĐCSVN, vol. 8, p. 75.

1. Lai Chau
2. Phong Tho and Lao Kay
3. Ha Giang
4. Cao Bang
5. Yen Bay
6. Tuyen Quang
7. Bac Kan
8. Lang Son
9. Son La
10. Phu Tho
11. Vinh-Phuc Yen
12. Thai Nguyen
13. Phu Lang Thuong
14. Hai Ninh
15. Ha Tay
16. Bac Ninh and Gia Lam
17. Kien An
18. Quang Yen
19. Hoa Binh
20. Hung Yen
21. Hai Duong
22. Ha Nam
23. Thai Binh
24. Thanh Hoa
25. Ninh Binh
26. Nam Dinh and Bui Chu
27. Nghe An
28. Ha Tinh
29. Quang Binh
30. Quang Tri
31. Thua Thien
32. Quang Nam
33. Quang Ngai
34. Kontum
35. Binh Dinh
36. Phu Yen
37. Darlac
38. Khanh Hoa
39. Phan Rang
40. Haut Don Nai
41. Thuan
42. Thu Dau Mot
43. Tay Ninh
44. Bien Hoa
45. Ba Ria
46. Gia Dinh
47. Cholon
48. Go Cong
49. Tan An
50. My Tho
51. Sadec
52. Long Xuyen
53. Chau Doc
54. Ha Tien
55. Rach Gia
56. Bac Lieu
57. Soc Trang
58. Tra Vinh
59. Can Tho
60. Vinh Long
61. Ben Tre

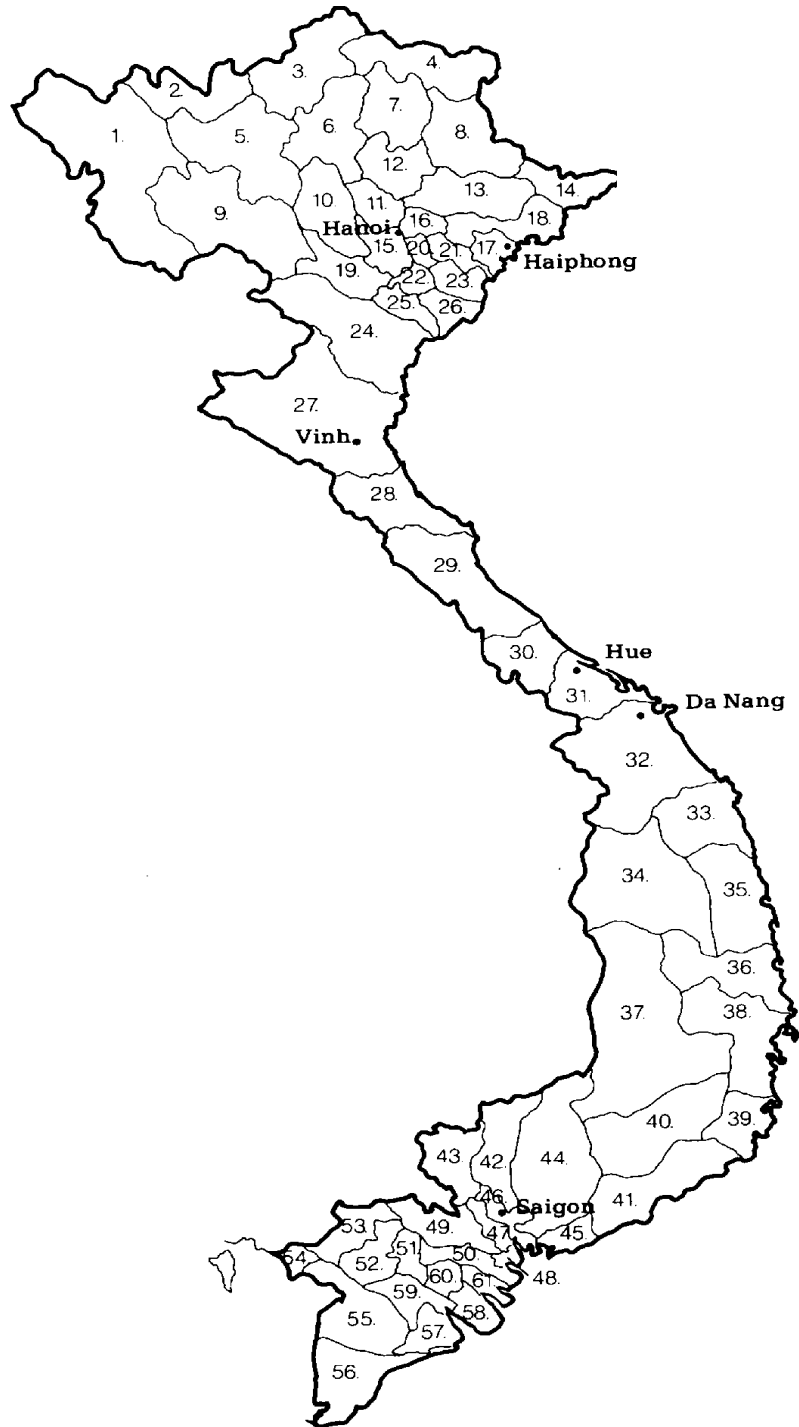


Illustration 2.1: French Colonial Administrative Map of Việt Nam (pre-1954).
 Source: http://coombs.anu.edu.au/~vern/ban_do/colonie.gif

Table 2.1: North Việt Nam provinces (areas) that belonged to an interzone at the time of land reform.

Sources: Trần Phương (1968), Moise (1983), Decree No. 127/SL

Interzone	Names of Provinces
Interzone I (Việt Bắc)	Hà Giang (3), Cao Bằng (4), Tuyên Quang (6), Bắc Kạn (7), Thái Nguyên (12), Lạng Sơn (8), Vĩnh Phúc (11), Phú Thọ (10), Bắc Ninh (16), Hải Ninh (14), Bắc Giang (13, Phủ Lạng Thương in map)
Interzone II	Lai Châu (1), Sơn La (9)
Interzone III	Ninh Bình (25), Hoà Bình (19), Hưng Yên (20), Hải Dương (21), Thái Bình (23), Kiến An (17), Lào Cai (2), Yên Bái (5), Hà Nam (22), Nam Định (26), Hà Đông and Sơn Tây (15, Hà Tây in map)
Interzone IV	Thanh Hoá (24), Nghệ An (27), Hà Tĩnh (28), Quảng Bình (29)
Areas that do not seem to have been in any interzone	Hà Nội, Hải Phòng

Note: An Interzone or “liên khu” in Vietnamese, is an administrative grouping of several provinces. Six interzones were established during the resistance war against France. Interzone I (Việt Bắc) was the northeast region of Bắc bộ (Tonkin area), and contained a substantial population of ethnic minority groups. During the resistance years, the DRV had its headquarters there. Interzone II, western Bắc-bộ, had very large minority populations. Interzone III, the valley of the Red River, contained most of the ethnic Kinh Vietnamese. Interzone IV was the northern half of Trung-bộ (Annam area), stretching to just south of Hue. Interzone V was the southern half of Trung bộ. And Interzone VI was Nam-bộ (Cochinchina area). In Table 2.1, please refer to the number () next to the name of the province to identify the province in Illustration 2.1.

foreign aggression.” Many fighters who joined the nationalist resistance against the French had rural backgrounds or came from the rural gentry and landowning families.²³ The cadres nonetheless “followed the tail of the poor and middle [class] peasants” and intimidated, arrested, and terrorized them. Consequently, instead of uniting the masses, they caused resentment, discontent and fear, which drove landowners and rich peasants to mistrust and be alienated from the revolution, even leading to anti-government protests in a few places.²⁴

The severity of this problem, together with the difficulties of trying to establish political control in the midst of the French return to Hà Nội and of its own relocation to the mountainous Việt Bắc, inevitably pushed the ICP to set aside its anti-feudal objectives until conditions were more favorable.²⁵ Constrained by these developments and the need to maximize their support among all social classes to bolster the resistance, the ICP launched a campaign to unite the people, and bring them closer to the Party. In a report entitled, “Our Policy,” General Secretary of the Party, Trường Chinh accused the French of using divisive tactics to undermine Vietnamese class unity. He called for a national united front (mặt trận thống nhất) to unite all Vietnamese regardless of race, class, religion, or political affiliation. As embodied in the slogan “Trung, Nam, Bắc một nhà,” literally “Central, South, North one house,” social classes and political groups were urged to set aside their differences, to compromise, and to help each other in the interests of creating one united nation. Thus, the ICP encouraged landowners and tenants to ‘concede’ to each other’s

²³ It is important to note that the Việt Minh organization was a coalition of several nationalist groups, which many fighters joined for the nationalist cause of liberating Việt Nam from French colonialism, and not necessarily to establish a socialist state. That is why from 1945-1951, the ICP formally removed its name from all public mediums, fearing that its communist associations would deter the support of other nationalists.

²⁴ ‘Nghị quyết của toàn kỳ đại biểu khoá đại’ [Resolution by the Annual Extended Delegation], 21-26 June, 1946. ĐCSVN, vol. 8, p. 75, 84-5.

²⁵ The anti-feudal objectives were embodied in the slogan ‘land-to-the-tiller’ in the Party’s declaration in 1930.

interest, and to continue cultivating.²⁶ They insisted that tenants and peasants honor the landowner's constitutional rights of private ownership by paying rents and taking care of crops.²⁷ This was a temporary strategy, aimed at retaining the support of the rich peasants and landowners for the resistance, both because of their political influence at the local level, and because they contributed a large amount of the wealth needed to sustain the Việt Minh army and government during the early years of the resistance. However, as Trường Chinh also argued, this unifying tactic of 'internal détente to deal with the external' was necessarily opportunistic, done to achieve greater political purposes. Once the political objectives of winning the resistance and gaining the political advantage in Việt Nam were met, the issue of class solidarity would no longer be relevant, and thus class struggle would proceed in order to consolidate power at the rural level.²⁸

Thus, despite promulgating land policies as early as the summer and autumn of 1945, these strategies had a very limited practical effect for a number of reasons. First, due to a weak political position, the ICP leadership was more preoccupied with engaging in other domestic and international events in order to establish political legitimacy. Second, there was a relatively limited area of cultivation under its permanent occupation. Aside from the provinces of Nghệ An and Thanh Hoá, other areas under the DRV control, particularly the Việt Bắc region, had very few landowners with large amounts of land. The third, and most important reason, was the essential need to gain the cooperation of and maintain the maximum support from both the rich and the poor. The ICP believed that in order to ensure sufficient food production to support their war effort, it could not risk disrupting the existing farming

²⁶ 'Chỉ thị của ban chấp hành trung ương về kháng chiến kiến quốc' [Directive by the Central Executive Committee on Resistance and State formation], 22 Nov. 1945. ĐCSVN, vol. 8, p. 32.

²⁷ 'Tuyên ngôn, chương trình của Việt Nam Độc Lập Đồng Minh' [Declaration, program of the League for the Independence of Vietnam], 25 Oct. 1941. QHNCHXHCNVN, vol. 1, p. 3-7.

²⁸ 'Chính sách của chúng ta' [Our Policy], Trường Chinh's report. ĐCSVN, vol. 8, p. 434-443.

patterns or alienating rural social classes by attempting to radically reshuffle rural society. Also, retreating from the kind of class struggle and land reform that it had intended to carry out, the ICP decided not to fully mobilize the peasants against the landowners. For both political and economic reasons, it understood that the landowners and rich peasants were useful for their political influence in the rural areas, especially in terms of providing the surplus production on which the ICP depended.²⁹ Thus, the pace and scope of their land policies from 1945 to 1947 were limited to mitigating the peasant's impoverished conditions, via rent and interest rate reductions, progressive taxation and wage controls, and utilizing uncultivated land to increase production. Only land that was communal, or owned by Frenchmen or Vietnamese traitors – but not land owned by supporters of the resistance – was confiscated and redistributed. These strategies were “conservatively” employed, to appease the interests of the rich and poor, and thereby allot the Việt Minh the necessary economic and manpower support needed to consolidate its political position throughout the rural areas and to sustain the war. It also needed time to raise class-consciousness among the peasantry and to indoctrinate its cadres with the essential experience and practical skills required before major land reform could be attempted.³⁰

In 1948, the Vietnamese nationalist movement took a crucial radical shift, which resulted from converging developments during late 1947 and early 1948. These developments included changes in international politics, in French-Vietnamese relations, and in the relationship between the communist leadership and its political adversaries within the nationalist resistance movement. The international political landscape, three years removed from the end of the Second World War, had begun to

²⁹ Andrew Vickerman, *The Fate of the Peasantry: Premature “Transition to Socialism” in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam* (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asian Studies, 1986), p.45-46.

³⁰ ‘Nghị quyết của hội nghị cán bộ trung ương’ [Resolution by the Central Committee Conference], 31 July-1 Aug. 1946. ĐCSVN, vol. 8, p. 104-5.

shape itself into two competing ideological and political blocs. The ICP sided with the communist revolutionary developments led by the Soviet Union and China.³¹ As a result, the resistance in Việt Nam shifted beyond the sole cause of national independence toward the goal of building a socialist regime. As argued at the Fifth Cadres' Conference in 1948, the revolution “can't not be influenced by the worldwide revolution. To advance forward, it has to search within the global revolutionary movement for new alliances and new experiences”³² Domestically, this apparent ideological shift led to serious rifts within the nationalist coalition, and marked the beginning of the end of the ‘national united front’ period and of cooperation with bourgeois nationalists.³³ Militarily, the resistance against the French had turned into a protracted struggle, as negotiations between the French and ICP leaders failed to reach a mutually agreeable solution.³⁴ Demographically, 90% of the population in Việt Nam were farmers, and agriculture accounted for the largest and most important factor in the economy. Given such large numbers, mobilizing the peasantry to join the resistance movement became a necessity. To achieve this, the ICP had to fulfill its promise of the peasants' main demand — land. However, up until 1948, aside from the Nghệ An and Thanh Hoá provinces and a few other parts of the mountainous Việt Bắc area, the revolutionary government had yet to attract the peasant masses, due the relatively limited cultivatable area under its direct occupation, and its of assertiveness

³¹ The Soviet Union had taken a moderate line toward the problems in Vietnam and did not give much political support to the Vietnamese resistance until 1948 and 1949. Only after China had recognized the DRV did the Soviet Union do so, in 1950.

³² ‘Chúng ta chiến đấu cho độc lập và dân chủ’ [We fight for independence and democracy], report read at the Fifth Cadres' Conference from 8-16 Aug. 1948. ĐCSVN, vol. 9, p. 200; World revolution is the Marxist concept of overthrowing capitalism in all countries, via organization of the working class.

³³ Tường Vũ, “‘It’s time for the Indochinese Revolution to show its true colours’: The Radical turn of Vietnamese politics in 1948”, in *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* (United Kingdom: The National University of Singapore, 2009), p. 519-542.

³⁴ ‘Chúng ta chiến đấu cho độc lập và dân chủ’ [We fight for Independence and Democracy], report read at the Fifth Cadres' Conference from 8-16 Aug. 1948. ĐCSVN, vol. 9, p. 184.

in implementing land policies.³⁵ As a result, policies such as the 25% reduction in land rent issued in 1945 yielded only a modest increase in economic output, leading to a shortage of adequate supplies (food, clothing, and weapons) required to support the revolution and to stabilize DRV control over the population. Such economic deficiencies led to the flow of French goods into the DRV domain, disrupting the economy and damaging the DRV's political and military influence.³⁶

Those effects led to a very significant change in the ICP's land reform policy and its implementation. Instead of adhering to its 1941 guidelines, which required that all energy be focused on resisting imperialism before carrying out land reform, the ICP decided to simultaneously carry out both anti-imperialist (phản đế [quốc]) and anti-feudalist (phản phong [kiến]) resistance. It advocated the gradual abolition of the landowning class, whom it classified as "exploitative feudal remnants," to improve the livelihood of the peasants, in order to persuade a large proportion of the population to become more dedicated to the government and its resistance movement.³⁷ To do so, at the Second Plenum of the ICP Central Committee from January 15 to 17, 1948, the ICP redefined the main goals of its land policy with 17 objectives. Overall, the statement upheld the land rent measures initiated in the November 20, 1945 directive, emphasizing the need for their full implementation in areas where this had yet to be done. It also ordered that property belonging to enemies and traitors be temporarily allocated to poor cultivators.³⁸

³⁵ In reality, the region under DRV control had very few large landowners, and those who did own land generally did not have large amounts.

³⁶ 'Chỉ thị gửi các khu ủy về việc tịch thu ruộng đất, tài sản của bọn Việt gian phản quốc' [Directive send to Area Commissar Regarding Confiscation of Land and Property Belonging to Traitors and Treason] Vol. 9, p. 61; 'Chỉ thị của trung ương phát động phong trào thi đua ái quốc' [Directive by the Central Committee on Mobilizing the Patriotic Movement], 27 Mar. 1948. ĐCSVN, vol. 9, p. 79.

³⁷ 'Chúng ta chiến đấu cho độc lập và dân chủ' [We fight for Independence and Democracy], report read at the Fifth Cadres' Conference from 8-16 Aug. 1948. ĐCSVN, vol. 9, p. 199.

³⁸ 'Nghị quyết hội nghị trung ương mở rộng' [The resolution of the expanded Central Committee Plenum], 15-17 Jan. 1948. ĐCSVN, vol. 9, p. 31-32; Edwin E. Moise, *Land Reform in China and North Vietnam: consolidating the revolution at the village level* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1983), p.156.

This general statement of objectives was soon followed by five concrete guidelines issued at the Fourth Cadres' Conference, regarding the usage of land and property belonging to Vietnamese traitors and Frenchmen.³⁹ That conference was followed by the Fifth Cadres' Conference from August 8 to 16, 1948, in which the Party explicitly defined anti-imperialism and anti-feudalism as the two main goals for its new democratic revolution. Once more, land reform was emphasized as a vital necessity toward winning full support for the ongoing nationalist struggle.⁴⁰ However, the ICP also realized that it could not risk disrupting the great unity (đại đoàn kết) by simply stripping the landowners, who had supported the independence movement, of their lands, and redistributing them to the poor.⁴¹ Hence, to balance the fulfillment of the promise of land for the peasants with the appeasement of the richer rural classes, the ICP advocated collaboration and solidarity with notables (thân sĩ) and intellectuals (trí thức) in the landowner and bourgeois classes, believing that these classes “still have the ability to resist the French, the ability to revolt.”⁴² In reality, these abilities were the economic and political influence that the landowning class possessed over the rural masses. Regardless of how much the ICP wanted to instigate a class struggle by blaming the landowners for all of the peasants' miseries, it could not deny the fact that a relatively respectful and good relationship existed between most landowners and peasants.

³⁹ Lâm Quang Huyền, *Vấn Đề Ruộng Đất ở Việt Nam* [Land issues in Việt Nam] (Hà Nội: NXBKHXH, 2007), p. 58-59.

⁴⁰ Viện Sử Học, *Việt Nam: những sự kiện lịch sử (1945-1975)* [Việt Nam: historical events (1945-1975)] (Việt Nam: NXBGD, 2002), p. 56.

⁴¹ “Đại đoàn kết” or the Great Unity, which has its roots in classical Chinese philosophy, refers to a utopian vision of the world in which everyone and everything is at peace. It has been invoked many times in modern Chinese history. In Chinese Marxism, it was associated with the state of world communism.

⁴² Edwin E. Moise, *Land Reform in China and North Vietnam: consolidating the revolution at the village level* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1983), p. 156; ‘Chúng ta chiến đấu cho độc lập và dân chủ’ [We fight for Independence and Democracy], report read at the Fifth Cadres' Conference from 8-16 Aug. 1948. ĐCSVN, vol. 9, p. 209-210.

For those reasons, the ICP resorted to fairly modest strategies. It gradually restricted the scope of the landowners' influence, modifying the land system by means of rent and interest rate reductions and cooperative reorganization in the rural areas, while at the same time calling for national unity among all social classes.⁴³ As argued at the conference, "there is no class struggle among the political parties and classes in the united front, but only sincere cooperation; everyone places the national interest above all."⁴⁴ To promote unity among these political parties and classes, and to avoid "making the already skeptical bourgeoisie, landowners, Catholics, become frightened, and (prevent) the reactionaries from seizing the opportunity to disrupt the unity," the ICP removed itself from the public sphere, and led the resistance covertly behind the united front.⁴⁵ By means of the Việt Minh front, it established organizations, unions, associations, and parties like the Socialist Party and Democratic Party, to integrate those groups into the revolution. In doing so, it was able to bond together the different parties and classes, and utilize them for the resistance.⁴⁶ At the same time, it was also able to remove any opposition, while it continued to strengthen and expand its political grip throughout the population.⁴⁷ It argued that only when the world situation had absolutely changed in its favor, or when the "resistance is completely successful," should it "rely on new conditions to push the land reform forward."⁴⁸

The ICP continued to encourage its officials to explain the necessity of making concessions to all rural social classes and convince them to compromise with each other, in order to avoid class conflicts that could harm the political interests of the

⁴³ Lâm Quang Huyền, *Vấn Đề Ruộng Đất ở Việt Nam* [Land issues in Việt Nam] (Hà Nội: NXBKHXH, 2007), p. 60.

⁴⁴ 'Chúng ta chiến đấu cho độc lập và dân chủ' [We fight for Independence and Democracy], report read at the Fifth Cadres' Conference from 8-16 Aug. 1948. ĐCSVN, vol. 9, p. 213.

⁴⁵ 'Tình hình và nhiệm vụ mới' [Party's situation and new tasks]. ĐCSVN, vol. 9, p. 316-317.

⁴⁶ 'Công tác dân vận và công tác mặt trận dân tộc thống nhất' [People's mobilization task and the National United Front task]. ĐCSVN, vol. 9, p. 260.

⁴⁷ 'Tình hình và nhiệm vụ mới' [Party's situation and new tasks]. ĐCSVN, vol. 9, p. 276-320.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 317; 'Chúng ta chiến đấu cho độc lập và dân chủ' [We fight for Independence and Democracy], report read at the Fifth Cadres' Conference from 8-16 Aug. 1948. ĐCSVN, vol. 9, p. 317.

nation. As expressed at the conference, “the working class of Indochina must rely on the middle class, poor, and landless peasants uniting with the rich peasants, and convince the landowners to resist French imperialists.”⁴⁹ However, to initiate its objective of carrying out rent and interest rate reductions, the ICP leadership also began mobilizing the peasantry by investigating rural conditions (điều tra nông thôn). On February 18, 1948 the Party’s Central Standing Committee (Ban Thường Vụ Trung Ương Đảng) issued a directive ordering each party zone committee (khu ủy) to enforce the government’s land resolutions, and to confiscate the property and land of Vietnamese traitors. Every committee was required to formulate a list of traitors’ names, survey their land and property, and prosecute them. However, the directive stressed that legal action against traitors was meant only to set an example; it should not go to extremes that could cause bewilderment among the capitalist and landowner classes or fear that it might be the first step toward the eventual confiscation of their property and land. Thus, the indictment of traitors was to be based on concrete evidence of treacherous acts; mere opportunists were to be granted clemency, while innocent wives and children were to be allowed adequate means to live.⁵⁰

On May 19, 1948, in a directive concerning mobilization, the Party Central Committee determined that its cadres at the provincial and district level (cấp khu) had not thoroughly enforced the government’s prescribed measure of investigating rural conditions.⁵¹ Hence, on November 23, 1948, the Party issued two successive directives on investigating rural conditions, and provided both survey templates and specific instructions on how to investigate, report, and analyze the rural conditions.

⁴⁹ ‘Chúng ta chiến đấu cho độc lập và dân chủ’ [We fight for Independence and Democracy], report read at the Fifth Cadres’ Conference from 8-16 Aug. 1948. ĐCSVN, vol. 9, p. 223.

⁵⁰ ‘Chỉ thị gửi các khu ủy về việc tịch thu ruộng đất, tài sản của bọn Việt gian phản quốc’ [Directive sent to area commissars regarding the confiscation of land and property of treasonous traitors]. ĐCSVN, vol. 9, p. 60-61.

⁵¹ ‘Chỉ thị về vấn đề vận động nông dân’ [Directive on the issue of mobilizing the peasants]. ĐCSVN, vol. 9, p. 140-141.

The survey focused on gathering information on the commune's overall population, and its economic, political, and military situations. However, the investigation still focused on the problems of land distribution and social class.⁵² The purpose of investigating rural conditions was to gather information to help the ICP and its cadre to better understand the peasant's situation, to improve its ability to mobilize the peasants and to implement its land policies.⁵³ The relevant reports, assessments, and regulations indicate a tremendous level of communication between the ICP leadership and its subordinate officials at the local levels, particularly during the campaign to investigate rural conditions. Moreover, it may be argued that, at the very least, by the end of 1948 the ICP leadership had begun to amass a much clearer understanding of rural North Việt Nam's political, cultural and economic situation.⁵⁴

At the Sixth Cadres' Conference convened on January 14 to 18, 1949, Trường Chinh encouraged "thorough implementation of the land reform policy that the Party had defined at the Fifth Cadres' Conference." He particularly urged the government to exert energy toward mobilizing the peasants to demand rent reduction, especially among members of the landowner class who were also comrades, party members, and members of resistance cadres, so that they could be used as inspirational examples for other landowners.⁵⁵ The conference issued a resolution to "speed up the [1948] campaign for the investigation of rural conditions to prepare...for a secured land reform program" that could be implemented whenever the conditions were suitable.⁵⁶

⁵² 'Chỉ thị về việc điều tra nông thôn của Ban Thường Vụ Trung ương Đảng' [The Party Central Standing Committee's directive on investigations of rural conditions], 23 Nov. 1948. ĐCSVN, vol. 9, p. 405-421

⁵³ Ibid., p. 417-421.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 405-416. (Thi hành đúng thi trung ương nắm rất rõ tình hình chính trị, xã hội và kinh tế của dân chúng ở những làng xã, nhưng nếu không thì vấn đề phải đặt ra là chính quyền có hiệu lực hay không?)

⁵⁵ 'Tích cực cầm cự và chuẩn bị tổng phản công' [Zealously contend and prepare for general counterattack], Trường Chinh's report at the Sixth Central Cadres' Conference held from 14-18 Jan. 1949. ĐCSVN, vol. 10, p. 57-58.

⁵⁶ 'Nghị quyết hội nghị cán bộ trung ương lần thứ sáu' [Resolution by the Sixt Central Cadres' Conference], 14-18 Jan. 1949. ĐCSVN, vol. 10, p. 12.

It continued to promote the enforcement of the 25% rent reduction, the equal redistribution of communal land, the increase of production, the establishment of cooperative [farming] (hợp tá xã), and the reformation of agriculture to improve the people's lives.⁵⁷ In a bid to boost the economy and resolve the problem of uncultivated plantations, the ICP issued a decree in February 1949, ordering the confiscation of Frenchmen's and traitors' lands, and the temporary allocation of those lands to the tillers. Land abandoned by its owners was also temporarily allocated to local peasants, until the owners returned to cultivate it themselves.⁵⁸ These orders were meant to be implemented throughout Việt Nam, particularly North Việt Nam; however, they were only enforced in areas under permanent or temporary control by the DRV, which at this time, was mostly limited to provinces such as Thái Nguyên, Bắc Giang and Phú Thọ in Interzone Việt Bắc and Thanh Hoá, Hà Tĩnh and Nghệ An in Interzone IV.

On July 1, 1949, the DRV issued decree 75/SL, dividing up confiscated land and property belonging to convicted traitors into three categories, whereby cultivatable lands were allocated to the tillers.⁵⁹ On July 14, 1949, the DRV ratified decree 78/SL, replacing the Ministry of Interior's 1945 circular⁶⁰ on rent reduction, and again calling for the implementation of the 25% land rent reduction and the cancellation of all debts and obligations imposed on the peasants before August 19, 1945. It oversaw the establishment of a Committee on Rent Reduction (Ủy ban Địa tô) in every province to evaluate complaints on rent reduction, and defined specific administrative authority

⁵⁷ Viện Sử Học, *Việt Nam: những sự kiện lịch sử (1945-1975)* [Việt Nam: historical events (1945-1975)] (Việt Nam: NXBGD, 2002), p. 61.

⁵⁸ 'Những nhiệm vụ kinh tế trong năm mới' [New tasks for the new year] report at the Sixth Central Cadres' Conference from 14-18 Jan. 1949. ĐCSVN, vol. 10, p. 160-161; TTKHXXH&NVQG Viện Sử Học. *Việt Nam Những sự Kiện Lịch Sử (1945-1975)*. NXB Giáo Dục, p. 62.; Lâm Quang Huyền, trang 60.

⁵⁹ Sắc lệnh số 75/SL [Decree No. 75/SL]. 22 April 2010.

<<http://www.vietlaw.gov.vn/LAWNET/docView.do?docid=604&type=html>>.

⁶⁰ A government circular is a written statement of government policy. It often provides information, guidance, rules, and/or background information on legislative and procedural matters.

and responsibility for carrying out the decree.⁶¹ This decree was supplemented by an order on July 23, 1949, exempting DRV personnel from the rent reduction, if they rented out less than three acres (mẫu) of land.⁶² On October 14, 1949, the Party Central Standing Committee issued a directive to enforce decree 78/SL, temporarily allocating Frenchmen's and traitor's land to poor peasants. The purpose of this action was to make the poor peasants become more supportive of the government. To successfully carry out this policy and achieve its purpose, the Central Committee prescribed precise methods for administrative agencies at all levels to inform, explain, and promote the government policy. The Temporary Allocation Council specified the time, location, tasks, and objectives for the cadres to follow during the implementation process. Able cadres were organized to mobilize the poor peasant masses, and enforce temporary land allocations and cooperative farming in rural areas under the DRV's control.⁶³ During this process, the Party also promoted the reorganization of institutions at the local level. Their aim was to restructure the local hierarchies and influences by removing landowners, rich peasants, and bullies (cường hào, cruel and abusive notables/landowners) and replacing them with elements from the poor, landless class. These elements were trained by experienced cadres, with resources provided by the Party's Central Committee. Once trained, they were appointed to influential positions, and provided with the resources and support necessary to develop and expand their authority throughout the areas under DRV control.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Sắc lệnh số 78/SL. [Decree No. 78/SL]. 10 Jan 2010. <<http://www.thuvienphapluat.vn/archive/Sac-lenh/Sac-lenh-78-SL-an-dinh-giam-dia-to-25-muc-dia-to-truoc-19-08-1945-vb36450t18.aspx>>.

⁶² Edwin E. Moise, *Land Reform in China and North Vietnam: consolidating the revolution at the village level* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1983), p.157.

⁶³ 'Chỉ thị của ban thường vụ trung ương' [Directive by the Party Central Standing Committee] on temporarily allocating the land of traitors to poor tillers, 14 Oct. 1949. ĐCSVN, vol. 10, p. 299-303.

⁶⁴ 'Thông tri của ban thường vụ trung ương' [Notification by the Central Standing Committee] regarding reorganizing peasants' organizations, 18 Nov. 1949. ĐCSVN, vol. 10, p. 314-315.

During the years of resistance against the French between 1945 and 1949, the ICP had to temporarily put aside its original policy of “land-to-the-tiller.” Therefore, land policies primarily consisted of rent and interest rate reduction, progressive taxation and wage controls, redistribution of lands owned collectively by the village-commune or belonging to Frenchmen and Vietnamese traitors, and increasing production through the utilization of uncultivated land. These measures helped to mobilize the population against the French, but did not lead to a significant attack on the rural rich class. There were a number of reasons, but most fundamentally, the ICP realized that the war effort required the strong support of the majority of poor peasants but also the cooperation of the landowners and rich peasants, who were essential for their economic, political, and social influence at the local level. Thus, the ICP could not disrupt the united front by enforcing major agrarian reform, which would require the confiscation of land and wealth from the landowners and rich peasants. It also understood that it lacked sufficient political control over rural areas, sufficient numbers of trained and educated cadres, and the required degree of class-consciousness among the peasantry to carry out major agrarian reforms. These circumstances began to change in late 1949, when policies focused more on understanding conditions at the rural level, restructuring the local organizations, and training cadres with the necessary experience to lay the groundwork for a major shift in agrarian policy beginning in 1950.

CHAPTER THREE
THE VIETNAMESE COMMUNIST PARTY'S LAND POLICY DURING THE
REVOLUTIONARY RESISTANCE (1950-1953)

Up until 1950, the ICP's land policies were modest, limited to demanding rent reduction and to investigating conditions in rural areas. Their motivation was the need to appease all classes in order to gain the support of the masses and maintain a united national front in the anti-imperialist struggle. Although the fundamental line of maintaining a broad united front was retained in the period from 1950 to 1953, the land program was redefined to become more radical and 'leftist' (tả khuynh) because of changing international and national conditions. These shifting conditions included the victory of the Chinese Communist Party in 1949 in China, which militarily secured the DRV's rear areas and eased the supply problem, and the Soviet Union's full recognition of the DRV and approval of its national liberation struggle in 1950.⁶⁵ Internally, the military situation in Việt Nam shifted in favor of the resistance forces, and the ICP officially re-emerged as the Việt Nam Workers' Party (Đảng Lao Động Việt Nam) in 1951. Consequently, beginning in 1950, more comprehensive and insistent land policies were formulated, and greater efforts were made to ensure the actual implementation of these policies.⁶⁶

The Central Standing Committee convened the Party's Third National Conference from January 21 to February 3, 1950, to reevaluate the Party's resistance guidelines and policies. The Conference put forward ten tasks for 1950 to prepare to shift the protracted resistance into a full-fledged counterattack war. For the first time,

⁶⁵ 'Nghị quyết của thường vụ trung ương' [Resolution by the Central Standing Committee], 4 Feb. 1950. ĐCSVN, vol. 11, p. 222.

⁶⁶ History of the Communist Party of Vietnam. Hà Nội: Foreign Languages Publishing House, p. 114-115.

class struggle was officially emphasized among the most important concerns that went hand-in-hand with the military struggle.⁶⁷ On February 10, 1950, in the report called ‘The Party’s Land Policy and the Problem of Investigating Rural Conditions’ at the Investigations of Rural Conditions Conference, Trường Chinh outlined a more radical land policy, which called for the complete realization of the slogan “người cày có ruộng” (land-to-the-tiller). He argued that 50% of Việt Nam’s cultivatable land was in the hands of indigenous landowners, 25% was in the hands of the colonists, and only the remaining 25% belonged to the peasants who formed the majority of the Vietnamese population. The numbers were somewhat disputable; however, they were used to illustrate the disparity that led to the exploitation of land rent, shortages in agricultural production, and the shortage of arable farmland for tillers. Even though the ICP had implemented various land initiatives since the August Revolution to alleviate this disparity, those programs yielded very little success. Therefore, he advocated a thorough reformation of the land system to abolish the colonial land system and feudal arrangements in agriculture and to create farmland for the tillers. Ultimately, the most important objective of these land reforms was to gain an advantage for the resistance. However, he emphasized that these policies should not be permanent. Instead, it was necessary “to change and transform according to national and international conditions different each time, according to the development of the resistance and its conditions.” Sometime the policy was applied with a certain degree of leniency and calmness; at other time, it was swift and powerful.⁶⁸ Accordingly, the land reform program was to follow three steps: first, those lands belonging to colonialists and traitors were to be confiscated without compensation and

⁶⁷ ‘Hoàn thành nhiệm vụ chuẩn bị chuyển mạnh sang tổng phản công’ [Complete the task of preparing for general counterattack] report at the Third National Conference. ĐCSVN, vol. 11, p. 19-104, 97. NXB Giáo Dục, p. 73.

⁶⁸ ‘Chính sách ruộng đất của đảng và vấn đề điều tra nông thôn’ [The Party’s land policy and the issue of investigations the rural conditions], 10, Feb. 1950. ĐCSVN, vol. 11, p. 229-242.

redistributed among the poor peasants, land rent and interest rates were to be reduced, and cooperative agriculture was to be developed. Second, the land of major landowners was to be confiscated, redistributed to the tillers, and remnants of the feudal system were to be eradicated. Lastly, the exploitive land rent system was to be destroyed (turning landowners into peasants), and the slogan “land-to-the-tillers” was to be carried out.⁶⁹

However, at the time, his statement was just an ideological argument for a progressive reform that was to come later. Trường Chinh understood that, as a practical matter, it was not possible to simultaneously implement a radical land reform and fight the resistance war. Hardline reforms were to be delayed, in order to maintain a united front against the French. Therefore, there was no immediate change in the ICP’s actual policy. Instead, the focus was shifted more toward implementing the investigation of rural conditions, completing the first phase (reducing rent and interest rates), and preparing for more radical land reform. Only when the anti-French resistance had become successful would the anti-feudal resistance begin. The key objective then would be to “dispose of the exploitive land rent regime by disposing of the big landowners’ exploitive regime.”⁷⁰

Consequently, a large number of successive moderate decrees to implement provisional land redistributions and land rent reductions were ratified, thereby providing land to the peasants while also weakening the landowners’ economic position. Beginning on February 13, 1950, Hồ Chí Minh ratified decree 25/SL, extending the effects of previous land redistribution measures by classifying all abandoned lands according to the political behavior of the owners. Lands belonging to Vietnamese traitors were confiscated, while the lands of absentee owners (lands left

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 234.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 235-242

behind by owners who had fled to the cities for security reasons) were temporarily allocated to tillers, but could eventually be returned if the political conduct of the owner during the resistance was deemed acceptable.⁷¹ On February 15, 1950, decree 26/SL was ratified to establish the Communal Committee on Rent Reduction (ban giảm tô xã). The responsibility of this committee was to investigate and resolve conflicts between tenants and landowners relating to rent reduction.⁷² On April 5, 1950, the Central Committee issued a directive to Interzones Việt Bắc, III, and IV to investigate the situation in rural areas, to help the Party fix past mistakes and formulate a more extensive land reform policy for the future.⁷³ In May, the DRV issued a decree expropriating all uncultivated and abandoned lands, temporarily allocating them to poor tillers, and exempting them from taxes for the first three years.⁷⁴ On May 22, 1950, the DRV issued decree 88/SL, defining tenancy regulations (thẻ lệ lĩnh canh) to protect the farming rights of tenants, and prohibiting landowners from reclaiming the land without permission.⁷⁵ It was followed with decree 89/SL, regulating interest rate reduction, remission, and implementing a moratorium on previous debts.⁷⁶ This was supplemented with yet another decree in October 1950, which postponed all debts borrowed before the August Revolution; eradicated any debts in which the tenants had already paid interest equal to twice the

⁷¹ Sắc lệnh số 25/SL [Decree No. 25/SL] 22 April 2010.

<http://laws.dongnai.gov.vn/1945_to_1950/1950/195002/195002130001>.

⁷² Sắc lệnh số 26/SL [Decree No. 26/SL] 22 April 2010. <<http://www.thuvienphapluat.vn/archive/Sac-lenh/Sac-lenh-26-SL-thanh-lap-Ban-giam-to-xa-vb36527t18.aspx>>.

⁷³ ‘Chỉ thị của ban thường vụ trung ương’ [Resolution by the Central Standing Committee] regarding the task of land surveys, from 5 Apr. 1950. ĐCSVN, vol. 11, p. 309-310.

⁷⁴ Lâm Quang Huyền, *Vấn Đề Ruộng Đất ở Việt Nam* [Land issues in Việt Nam] (Hà Nội: NXBKHXH, 2007), p. 61.

⁷⁵ Sắc lệnh số 88/SL [Decree No. 88/SL] 22 April 2010.

<http://laws.dongnai.gov.vn/1945_to_1950/1950/195005/195005220010/print_default>.

⁷⁶ Viện Sử Học, *Việt Nam: những sự kiện lịch sử (1945-1975)* [Việt Nam: historical events (1945-1975)] (Việt Nam: NXBGD, 2002), p. 79

amount of the original loan; and reduced the interest rate on debts borrowed before the issuing of the decree.⁷⁷

On July 17, 1950, the Central Standing Committee ordered the completion of rent reduction and the beginning of the implementation of interest rate reduction. According to this directive, a number of landowners, rich peasants, and Catholics had not reduced rent by the 25% mandated by the government. This was due to local administrative leaders' inability to arouse the peasants to struggle against the landowners for rent reduction. Hence, the Central Committee instructed its leaders to apply persuasion and the pressure of the masses to robustly force the landowners into reducing rent. Regarding interest rate reduction, the directive requested the implementation of decree 78/SL on reducing usurious interest rates, which required the elimination of old debts or high interest rates that poor peasants were incapable of repaying in full. The directive detailed eight clauses, prescribing the necessary steps toward completing rent and interest reduction.⁷⁸ Also on this day, in a directive to all party administrators, the ICP ordered further training of cadres to investigate rural conditions and to prepare for more extensive land reforms.⁷⁹

To advance its preparations for the implementation of land reform, the Central Standing Committee applied the information gathered from the investigations into rural conditions and issued a directive stipulating the standards for class demarcation in rural Việt Nam. The objective was to create a uniform definition of each class, to avoid making previous mistakes when implementing future reforms. The essential

⁷⁷ Lâm Quang Huyền, *Vấn Đề Ruộng Đất ở Việt Nam* [Land issues in Việt Nam] (Hà Nội: NXBKHXH, 2007), p. 61.

⁷⁸ 'Chỉ thị của ban thường vụ trung ương về việc hoàn thành giảm tô, thực hiện giảm tức' [Resolution by the Central Standing Committee regarding completing rent reduction, and starting interest rate reduction], 17-7, 1950. ĐCSVN, vol. 11, p. 386-392.

⁷⁹ 'Chỉ thị của ban thường vụ trung ương về công tác điều tra nông thôn năm 1950' [Directive by the Central Standing Committee on the task of investigating the rural areas in 1950], 17 July 1950. ĐCSVN, vol. 11, p. 393-394.

standard for classification into socioeconomic classes in rural areas was based on the main source of income (ie. means of agricultural production) available for each person and each family. It included land, cattle, farm tools, and houses.⁸⁰ Based on these standards, the rural population was classified as follows:

- a) Landowner: the rural bourgeoisie who did not work himself, but lived on land rent, usury, hiring labor, entrepreneurship, and trade.
- b) Rich peasant: peasant who owned land and farm implements, and tilled his land himself, but also exploited others by hiring labor or leasing farmland to collect land rent and interest.
- c) Middle class peasant: peasant who had enough land to till to meet the needs of his family, and his own farm implements, but lived solely by tilling his land without exploiting others. This category also included peasants who did not own their own land, and rented their entire holding from the landowners.
- d) Poor peasant: peasant who had very little land and farm implements; to meet his needs, he needed to rent additional land from others or sell his own labor.
- e) Landless peasant: those without land or tools; he must sell his labor to live.⁸¹

The directive also declared that these standards of classification, by themselves, were not sufficient to correctly classify the rural population, and thus suggested that the opinions of the local people must also be taken into consideration.⁸² In general, these standards of classification were so complex and poorly defined that cadres were

⁸⁰ 'Chỉ thị của ban thường vụ trung ương về việc phân định thành phần các tầng lớp nhân dân ở nông thôn' [Directive by the Central Standing Committee on social status demarcation in the rural areas], 17 July, 1950. ĐCSVN, vol. 11, p. 395-403.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 399.

⁸² Ibid., p. 403, 405-407.

unable to apply them correctly.⁸³ This led to many problems of false and mistaken classifications, such as rich and middle class peasants being mistakenly classified as landowners and treated with more severity than was intended. This was especially the case during the rigorous implementation of the Land Reform Proper.

By November 5, 1950, the ICP began to realizing that there were errors being committed that were detrimental to its rural policy.⁸⁴ The ICP determined that these errors stemmed from two fundamental bureaucratic causes. The first was the ICP leaders' inability to popularize and manage the progress of its policy, and its officials' extremist tendencies when executing the policy. Second, cadres and local party members failed to fully comprehend the Party's land, economic, and class policies in rural areas, and therefore were not able to garner the support for the resistance.⁸⁵ Consequently, the Party Central Standing Committee issued a directive to rectify these errors by emphasizing the need to rely on the collaboration of all rural social classes to fight off imperialist aggression and traitors, and to strengthen the people's democratic government.⁸⁶ However, based on annual reports from the Interzones, the success of implementing the land policies varied significantly, depending on the extent of geopolitical control the DRV had over an area. Areas under DRV's firm control, such as Phú Thọ, Thái Nguyên, Thái Bình, Ninh Bình, Nghệ An, and Thanh Hoá, yielded the

⁸³ There were arguments that argued that these standards of classification were based on standards used by the Chinese during their land reform campaign; thus, making such standards inapplicable to North Việt Nam's conditions. These arguments were based on the notion that the land reform in North Việt Nam was heavily influenced by the land reform in China, particularly the pressure from Chinese leaders and advisors.

⁸⁴ 'Chỉ thị của ban thường vụ trung ương về vấn đề sửa chữa những sai lầm, khuyết điểm trong việc thi hành chính sách nông thôn của Đảng' [Resolution by the Central Standing Committee on correcting the errors and shortcomings in the implementation of the Party's rural land policy], 5 Nov. 1950. ĐCSVN, vol. 11, p. 517-541.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 522-523; 'Chỉ thị của ban thường vụ trung ương về việc sửa chữa quan niệm sai lệch về vấn đề kinh tế' [Resolution by the Central Standing Committee regarding correcting erroneous ideas on economics], 30 Nov. 1950. ĐCSVN, vol. 11, p. 542-543.

⁸⁶ 'Chỉ thị của ban thường vụ trung ương về vấn đề sửa chữa những sai lầm, khuyết điểm trong việc thi hành chính sách nông thôn của Đảng' [Resolution by the Central Standing Committee on correcting the errors and, shortcomings in the implementation of the Party's rural land policy], 5 Nov. 1950. ĐCSVN, vol. 11, p. 524.

most success in the execution and response to the government policies, whereas reforms were much slower in areas in which the DRV did not have significant control.⁸⁷ To address this matter, on November 17, 1950, the DRV issued three successive decrees (155/SL, 156/SL and 157/SL) to establish Interzone Military Tribunals (toà án quân sự liên khu), Interzone People's Courts (toà án nhân dân liên khu), and People's Courts (toà án nhân dân) in order to firmly consolidate control of temporarily occupied areas and to better enforce its land policies.⁸⁸ However, these tribunals and courts were most effectively established in areas under full or temporary control of the DRV, like provinces in Interzones Việt Bắc, III and IV.⁸⁹

From February 11 to 19, 1951, the ICP convened its Second National Party Congress in Tuyên Quang, publicly re-launching the communist party as the Việt Nam Workers' Party (VWP, Đảng Lao Động Việt Nam) in order to legitimize and strengthen the Party's leadership role in the resistance.⁹⁰ At the conference, Trường Chinh read the Việt Nam Revolutionary Thesis (Luận Cương Cách Mạng Việt Nam), outlining three main objectives for the Vietnamese revolution: overthrow French

⁸⁷ 'Báo cáo tình hình Liên khu Việt Bắc 1950' [Report on the situation in Interzone Việt Bắc for 1950]. ĐCSVN, vol. 11, p. 675-683; 'Báo cáo tình hình Liên khu 3 năm 1950' [Report on the situation in Interzone 3 for 1950]. ĐCSVN, vol. 11, p. 684-692; 'Báo cáo tình hình Hà Nội năm 1950' [Report on the situation in Hà Nội for 1950]. ĐCSVN, vol. 11, p. 693-704; 'Báo cáo tình hình Liên khu 4 trong năm 1950' [Report on the situation in Interzone 4 for 1950]. ĐCSVN, vol. 11, p. 705-710. 'Báo cáo tình hình Liên Khu 5 trong năm 1950' [Report on the situation in Interzone 5 for 1950]. ĐCSVN, vol. 11, p. 711-718; 'Báo cáo tình hình Nam Bộ năm 1950' [Report on the situation in Nam Bộ for 1950]. ĐCSVN, vol. 11, p. 719-727. VKD, tap 11, trang 675, 684, 693, 705, 711, 719. Báo cáo các LK.

⁸⁸ Sắc lệnh số 155/SL [Decree No. 155/SL]. 22 April 2010.

<<http://www.thuvienphapluat.vn/archive/Sac-lenh/Sac-lenh-155-SL-to-chuc-toa-an-quan-su-lien-khu-vb36633t18.aspx>>; Sắc lệnh số 156/SL [Decree No. 156/SL]. 22 April 2010.

<<http://www.thuvienphapluat.vn/archive/Sac-lenh/Sac-lenh-156-SL-thiet-lap-Toa-an-nhan-dan-Lien-khu-vb36631t18.aspx>>; Sắc lệnh số 157/SL [Decree No. 157/SL]. 22 April 2010.

<http://vbqpl.moj.gov.vn/vbpg/Lists/Vn%20bn%20php%20lut/View_Detail.aspx?ItemID=32>

⁸⁹ Refer to Illustration 2.1 and Table 2.1.

⁹⁰ 'Báo cáo chính trị tại đại hội đại biểu toàn quốc lần thứ II của Đảng' [Political report from Party's Second National Delegation Conference] a report by Hồ Chí Minh. ĐCSVN, vol. 12, p. 13, 33-39; 'Hoàn thành giải phóng dân tộc, phát triển dân chủ nhân dân, tiến tới chủ nghĩa xã hội' [Complete national liberation to develop a people's democracy, to advance socialism] Việt Nam revolutionary thesis presented by Trường Chinh at the Party's Second National Delegation Conference. ĐCSVN, vol. 12, p. 156-175.

imperialism, abolish the feudal and semi-feudal system, and construct the basis for socialism.⁹¹ He emphasized that the driving motives for revolution were the people and the workers, and the fundamental aim during this transition stage was toward constructing a regime based on a dictatorship of the people, thereby making land reform one of the major concrete policies of the revolution.⁹² The landowners were defined as the main object of land reform and class struggle; however, they still played a vital role in the 1951 anti-imperialist struggle. Therefore, to raise the peasant's standard of living without infringing on the resistance's great unity, the VWP's rural policy during this period was limited yet again to the tasks of rent and interest rate reduction, and temporary allocation of land.⁹³ However, this unity among all social classes varied significantly depending on the economic and political conditions of the time. The VWP understood that during this anti-imperialist period, Việt Nam required the unity of the patriotic and democratic members of all classes in society. As a result, it continued advocating for provisional recognition of landowner's allegiance and their rights of citizenship and private property. Only when conditions became more favorable toward anti-feudal resistance, would it come forward and lead the major class struggle against the landowners, implement land reforms, and achieve the ultimate objective of developing cooperative farming.⁹⁴

For years, the communist leadership had repeatedly proclaimed the need to sustain class unity in its attempts to reassure the richer rural classes (landowners and

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 40-175.

⁹² Ibid., p. 81, 93.

⁹³ Ibid., p.131-135; 'Một số vấn đề cốt yếu của chính quyền dân chủ nhân dân Việt Nam' [Several fundamental issues of the People's Democratic of Việt Nam]. ĐCSVN, vol. 12, p. 222-223; 'Chính cương Đảng Lao Động Việt Nam' [Việt Nam Worker's Party platform]. ĐCSVN, vol. 12, p. 440; A unity based largely on "reliance on the poor, landless, and middle class peasants, united with the rich peasants, to pull a large number of the landowners onto the side of the resistance to defeat imperialist aggression, and gradually implement land reform, develop agriculture, construct cooperatives and push the people's national democratic revolution forward," and establish a dictatorship of the people's government.

⁹⁴ 'Một số vấn đề cốt yếu của chính quyền dân chủ nhân dân Việt Nam' [Several fundamental issues of the People's Democratic of Việt Nam]. ĐCSVN, vol. 12, p. 224, 244.

rich peasants) that their positions were secure, while “buying” the support of poorer peasants’ with the promise of land rent and interest rate reductions. However, this stance shifted dramatically in 1951 when the VWP officially emerged before the public, and openly announced its leadership role in the national resistance.⁹⁵ Strengthened by the victory of the Chinese Communist Party and the change in its military situation, the VWP leadership began more aggressively laying the groundwork for the future implementation of the land reform. This was exemplified by decree 13/SL issued on May 1, 1951 and decree 40/SL issued on July 15, 1951, restructuring the previous taxation system by imposing a steep graduated tax, in order to weaken the elite economic structure by reducing the net income of landowners and rich peasants. This tax replaced the existing range of taxes on land, trade, slaughtering, forestry, and other activities. The tax was collected in the form of grain, and the rate was theoretically proportionate by class categorization: 6-10% for poor peasants, 10-20% for middle class peasants, and 30-50% for landowners.⁹⁶ Although there were cases of understatement and outright tax evasion, overall the taxes generated a contribution that significantly improved the DRV’s budgetary situation, and helped consolidate its economic position. On a related note, this tax system also produced estimates of individual landholdings and agricultural yields, which would be needed for subsequent land reform campaigns. Theoretically, this tax system was meant to be implemented throughout all of Việt Nam; however, it was most effective

⁹⁵ Viện Sử Học, *Việt Nam: những sự kiện lịch sử (1945-1975)* [Việt Nam: historical events (1945-1975)] (Việt Nam: NXBGD, 2002), p. 92; ‘Chỉ thị của ban chấp hành trung ương về vấn đề Đảng ra công khai’ [Directive from Party Central Executive Committee on the issue of the Party coming out publicly], 30 April, 1951. ĐCSVN, vol. 12, p.530.

⁹⁶ Lâm Quang Huyền, *Vấn Đề Ruộng Đất ở Việt Nam* [Land issues in Việt Nam] (Hà Nội: NXBKHXH, 2007), p. 95; Sắc Lệnh Số 13/SL [Decree No. 13/SL]. 23 April 2010. <<http://luat.xalo.vn/phap-luat/Sac-lenh/122677028/Sac-lenh-Ve-viec-cai-cach-che-do-dam-phu-bai-bo-cac-thu-dong-gop-cu-nhu-la-quy-cong-luong-thue-dien-tho-v-v-bai-bo-viec-mua-thoc-dinh-gia-va-dat-ra-thue-nong-nghiep-mua-bang-thoc-ke-tu-vu-thue-1951.html>>; Sắc lệnh số 40/SL [Decree No. 40/SL]. 23 April 2010. <<http://luat.xalo.vn/phap-luat/Sac-lenh/122720742/Sac-lenh-Ve-viec-ban-hanh-dieu-le-tam-thoi-thue-nong-nghiep.html>>.

in areas that were under full control of the DRV and produced large amounts of grain, like Thanh Hoá, Nghệ An and Hà Tĩnh.

To consolidate its power, the VWP convened the First National Propaganda and Training Conference from August 21-30, 1951, to emphasize the vital function of political indoctrination and ideological leadership in the military. The aim was to train cadres and soldiers with a firm ideological and political understanding, and to enhance their awareness of the class and ethnic struggles required to construct a lasting and enduring ideological resistance mentality.⁹⁷ On December 29, 1951, the Central Standing Committee issued a directive requiring party committees at all local levels to launch a purification campaign within the Party. Its purpose was to correct mistakes committed by cadres and party members in order to enhance their ideological standards, and to reorganize the village-level branches of the VWP known as Party cells (*chi bộ*).⁹⁸ The directive specified two tasks: 1) conduct short-term training to help cadres understand the situation and tasks, 2) for party members at the rural Party cell level, conduct short-term re-education and reorganization of the organization.⁹⁹

By 1952, the VWP had gained significant strength, with much more favorable international and domestic conditions, exemplified by its public emergence in 1951. Though its land policy since 1945 had been constrained by the need to gain the support of the landowning class, it nonetheless had laid the necessary foundation for reform, and created significant changes in rural Việt Nam's land and class relations with its temporary allocation of land policy, rent reduction policy, and newly instituted tax system. At this point, the implementation of land reform took a more aggressive

⁹⁷Viện Sử Học, *Việt Nam: những sự kiện lịch sử (1945-1975)* [Việt Nam: historical events (1945-1975)] (Việt Nam: NXBGD, 2002), p. 100.

⁹⁸The "mistakes" are often not clearly defined by the documents, but they usually referred to bureaucratization, individualism, commandism, conservatism, and radicalism.

⁹⁹'Chỉ thị của ban bí thư về cuộc vận động chấn chỉnh Đảng' [Directive by the Party Secretariat on rectification of the mobilization of the Party], 29 Dec. 1951. ĐCSVN, vol. 12, p.627-629.

tone, as it began to argue for a simultaneous undertaking of the anti-imperialist and anti-feudalist struggles.¹⁰⁰ Its attitude changed from the united front policy, and returned more closely to the original 1930 policy line of class struggle, which called for the radical confiscation of land from landowners and churches, to be redistributed among the poor and landless peasants.¹⁰¹

In a significant change of tone from previous years, the VWP's land policy for 1952 presented at the Third Central Committee Conference blamed "hữu khuynh" (rightism) as the main cause of the improper application of its land policies. It contended that the failures were not because the "landowners refused to reduce rent and interest rates, but because cadres were not able to understand the importance of the land policies," and thus did not pay attention to the needs of the peasants. The failure of the VWP leadership to vigorously support a speedy and aggressive implementation strategy led to cadres becoming too cautious toward the landowners. Furthermore, the leadership did not appropriately deal with exploitive rich peasants. For those reasons, it did not dare to mobilize the masses to struggle and demand the implementation of the policy.¹⁰² Thus, to accommodate this new tone, the VWP began prescribing increasingly aggressive strategies to efficiently enforce rent and interest rate reduction, and to correct previous errors in the implementation of its policies. These strategies included promoting the VWP's policy to both the peasants and the landowners, mobilizing the peasants to demand rent and interest rate

¹⁰⁰ 'Hoàn thành giải phóng dân tộc, phát triển dân chủ nhân dân, tiến tới chủ nghĩa xã hội' [Complete national liberation to develop a people's democracy, and advance to socialism] Việt Nam revolutionary thesis presented by Trường Chinh at the Party's Second National Delegation Conference. ĐCSVN, vol. 12, p. 118-119.

¹⁰¹ 'Chính sách ruộng đất của ta hiện nay và cuộc vận động giảm tô giảm tức' [Our current policy on mobilizing rent and interest reduction]. ĐCSVN, vol. 13, p. 119-122. The objective was still to "rely on the poor and landless peasants, closely united with the middle class peasants, in collaboration with the rich peasants, to pull the landowners into the resistance, and fight off imperialist aggression and puppet Vietnamese traitors."

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 121-128. Đây là một sự thay đổi trong tư tưởng của Đảng về vấn đề tả khuynh và hữu khuynh.

reductions to weaken the landowners' influence, and guaranteeing the landowners' right to collect rent and interest, in order to retain the landowners on the side of the resistance.¹⁰³

Furthermore, to consolidate power and respond to the relatively rapid expansion of the Party, the VWP began to carry out a major internal Party rectification campaign. The purpose was to purge all elements from the VWP which could pose major threats to later policies, to furnish new class attitudes and educational attainment among cadres, and to prepare for the implementation of more radical policies. This purification campaign was directed against commandism, individualism, subjectivism, bureaucratization, and corruption. In May 1952, the VWP leaders opened their first class on Party purification, thus instituting their widest and most intensive campaign yet to reconstruct and reform its organization. From the lowest cadre to the highest party committee, from the arts to the military, everyone, everything, and every aspect of life were in one way or another reeducated, criticized, self-criticized, corrected, and purified with communist ideologies and tactics. The goal was to engrave in every cadre, party member, soldier, and person the communist ideological foundation and commitment needed to advance the resistance and the regime's policies, to strengthen its authority, and to prepare for major land reform.¹⁰⁴

On August 15, 1952, a Central Executive Committee directive was issued to supplement directive 37 by defining ten specific clauses on rural policy. These clauses included previous reform measures such as reducing rent and interest rates, opening wastelands and utilizing lands of absentee owners, temporarily allocating lands belonging to Frenchmen and Vietnamese collaborators to tillers, and utilizing

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 122-123.

¹⁰⁴ Viện Sử Học, *Việt Nam: những sự kiện lịch sử (1945-1975)* [Việt Nam: historical events (1945-1975)] (Việt Nam: NXBGD, 2002), p. 112, 115; 'Vấn đề chỉnh Đảng' [The matter of Party rectification] a report by Lê Văn Lương at the Third Party Central Committee Conference in 1952. ĐCSVN, vol 13, p. 101-106.

communal and donated lands. But most telling was the dramatic change of tone in the VWP's rural class strategy. Instead of continuing to "pull the landowners into the resistance," the strategy shifted to "pull in or neutralize some landowners, and expel imperialist and reactionary feudal large-landowners."¹⁰⁵ These words represented an important shift in the VWP's rural policy compared to its previous stance, especially toward the landowners. Combined with other rural regulations from 1951 to 1952, this shift could be seen as the first of the three steps toward distributionalist reform, consisting of mobilizing the masses to overthrow the landowning class, expropriating lands and redistributing them to the peasantry, and consolidating economic and political authority at the rural level.

This shift was reflected most clearly in two events in the fall of 1952. The first was the distribution of a paper entitled "Preliminary Comments on Mass Mobilization in 1953," sent to the VWP leadership, namely Hồ Chí Minh and Trường Chinh, by the Chinese ambassador-advisor to Việt Nam, La Quý Ba. Dated September 3, 1952, this 7-page paper could arguably be considered as one of the principal factors contributing to the dynamic shift in the VWP's 1952 land and class policy. More importantly, the paper served as the catalyst of the VWP's mass mobilization and Land Reform Proper campaign between 1953 and 1956. Divided into six main sections, the paper outlined the steps necessary to lead the mass mobilization movement, reorganize the village-commune system, and win political dominance in the rural areas. Its principal guideline was to mobilize the masses to attack and overcome the landowners' influence, to gain political dominance in the rural areas, to satisfy the needs of the

¹⁰⁵ 'Chỉ thị của ban chấp hành trung ương về chính sách ruộng đất của Đảng' [Directive by the Central Executive Committee on the Party's land policy]. ĐCSVN, vol. 13, p. 220-240, 239.

peasants [ie. redistribute lands], to increase agricultural production, and to garner the support of the resistance.¹⁰⁶

A close comparative examination of the VWP's land and mass mobilization policies before and after this paper was issued show that the paper had a significant influence on the development of the methodological structure for mass mobilization—from words to content. “Thẳng tay phát động quần chúng,” which literally means “harshly mobilize the masses,” was the maxim that brought “the sky-shaking and earth-shattering” fear to every Vietnamese in rural Việt Nam during the three-year period from 1953 to 1956. The aim of mobilizing the masses was, in fact, the mobilization of massive class struggles between the poor peasants and rich landowners, to improve the economy, and to gain the support of the rural population needed to win the resistance war and consolidate political power. Quý emphasized the need to “win the majority [peasants], isolate the minority [landowners], take advantage of their conflicts, and defeat each group.”¹⁰⁷ That objective was combined with the reorganization of the village-commune organizations (Party cell, Peasants' Association, administration, and rural armed forces) to win political dominance for the Party. In the paper, Quý diagrammed specific strategies necessary to carry out mass mobilization. To prepare, Quý advised the VWP leaders to investigate the land, class, organization, and cadre situations in the rural areas. Using the information drawn from these assessments, they were directed to prepare and train 200 cadres and divide them into 20 *đoàn* (brigades) to carry out mass mobilization experiments in 20 key village-communes in Interzone Việt Bắc and Interzone IV.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Call No: 1389. Ý kiến sơ bộ về vận động quần chúng năm 1953' [Preliminary Comments on Mass Mobilization in 1953]. La Quý Ba. Trường Chinh & Hồ Chí Minh. Việt Nam. 03 Spet. 1952.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, p. 3.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 7-8; Refer to Illustration 2.1 and Table 2.1.

The second event occurred on October 30 and 31, 1952, when Hồ Chí Minh sent two successive letters to the Soviet Union leader, Joseph Stalin, discussing the land reforms in Việt Nam. In a letter signed on the 30th, Hồ stated that he had started developing the land reform program and would present it to Stalin. In the letter, Hồ also requested that two Soviet officials come to Việt Nam to investigate the situation, and further requested 10 tons of malaria medicine, weapons, and permission for Việt Nam to send 50-100 Vietnamese students to the Soviet Union for training. In the second letter, dated on the 31 of October, Hồ sent Stalin the VWP's land reform program and asked for Stalin's instructions. In the letter, Hồ indicated that he composed the program with the help of two Chinese advisors, Lư Shao Shi and Văn Sha San.¹⁰⁹

These two events somewhat clarify the reasons why the VWP began to shift its stance on land reforms, especially the influence that China and the Soviet Union had on the change. Moreover, they also confirm that any land policies that came immediately before and after these events were aimed at preparing for class-struggle-based land reforms. Thus, to further prepare for mobilizing the masses (phát động quần chúng) and implement the VWP's land policies of rent and interest rate reduction in 1953, on November 25, 1952, the VWP's Secretariat ordered further investigations into rural conditions. These measures were designed to overthrow the landowning class, to weaken the feudal influences, and to win political dominance for the VWP in rural Việt Nam. The task of mass mobilization was envisioned as a tense class struggle that would require thoughtful preparation and a clear understanding of the rural situation. Therefore, investigating and understanding the agricultural, economic, class, and political conditions of rural Việt Nam were necessary. Rural class relations

¹⁰⁹ Hồ Chí Minh's letter to Joseph Stalin on the issue of land reform. 02 Feb. 2010. 06 May 2010. <<http://daiviet.multiply.com/journal/item/263/263>>.

were particularly important, because only through understanding these relationships could the VWP exploit the divisions between classes and ignite class struggle. A threefold strategy was employed to complete this task: first, to explore the exploitive interclass relationships in the rural areas and the impact of the VWP's land policies; second, to survey the conditions of the masses and the cadres' ability to improve them; third, to identify the rural traitors, reactionaries, and insubordinate elements, and particularly to examine their relationships with each other. This was achieved by sending cadre brigades (đoàn cán bộ) to communes to carry out the investigation. Members of each team were required to have a thorough grasp of the VWP's land policy, a clear and firm stance on class, the ability to demarcate class, to behave properly, and to have an enthusiastic spirit toward learning about the masses. During the investigative process, it was stressed that the teams were to follow the defined methods and resources provided by the central government to assist them in their investigations. All investigation teams were required to explore four situations: the status of past and current rural exploitation; the progress in implementing the Party's land policies; the relationships among the landowners, rich, middle class, poor, and landless peasants; and the effectiveness of cadres and party members at the commune Party cell.¹¹⁰ The investigations were required to rely primarily on information derived from the poor and landless peasants and the Peasants' Association. The Party emphasized that the investigation "must be urgently implemented, and completed before August 5, 1953" under the supervision of the Interzone Executive Committee and Provincial Executive Committee.¹¹¹ Again, the investigation was intended to help the VWP leaders gain a precise understanding of the rural conditions while formulating their land reform policies. These policies were ratified and enforced just a

¹¹⁰ "Mẫu điều tra nông thôn" [Investigations of the rural template]. ĐCSVN, vol. 13, p. 351-356.

¹¹¹ "Thông tri của ban bí thư về việc điều tra nông thôn" [Notification from the Party Secretariat regarding Investigations of the rural areas], 25 Nov. 1953. ĐCSVN, vol. 13, p. 347-350.

few months after the deadline for completing the investigation. This indicates a clear and systematic preparation in the development of land reform policy.

At the Fourth Plenum of the Việt Nam Worker's Party, held from January 25 to 30, 1953, Hồ Chí Minh read a report underlining the two main tasks that needed to be enforced in 1953 in order to gain a complete victory for the resistance. These tasks included leading the resistance and its military policy, and mobilizing the masses to further reduce rents and fully implement land reform. Concerning the land policy, Hồ argued that because of "special circumstances," only rent and interest rate reduction was implemented during the years before 1953. However, given that circumstances had changed, it was necessary for the revolution to expand its land policies and "improve the economic and political interests of the peasants" by enforcing more radical land reforms, namely redistributing land to the peasants. By accomplishing this feat, the VWP would then be able to fully mobilize the necessary manpower from the peasantry to advance the protracted resistance and gain absolute victory.¹¹²

Two developments that could have strongly influenced the VWP's policies, especially its land policy, were the the rising global influence of the Soviet Union and the completion of land reform in China in 1953. The VWP looked to the political and economic paths and policies of its larger allies as the model for its own revolutionary path. Therefore, in a lengthy report following Hồ's theme, Trường Chinh argued that it was necessary to take advantage of the support of the Soviet Union and China to simultaneously overthrow French imperialism and feudalism. In the report, he also defined the specific purpose, meaning, motto, methods, and plans for implementing the land reform policies. Changing its revolutionary tone, he suggested that the reason why radical rent and interest rate reductions had not been implemented during the

¹¹² 'Báo cáo tại hội nghị lần thứ tư ban chấp hành trung ương Đảng (khoá II) về tình hình trước mắt và nhiệm vụ cải cách ruộng đất' [Report at the Fourth Party Central Executive Committee Plenum regarding the initial situation and the task of land reform] 25 Jan. 1953. ĐCSVN, vol. 14, p. 14-29.

resistance years was that the degree of cooperation of the landowners with the resistance had been overestimated. But in reality, he emphasized that the landowners were not cooperative partners, but instead were feudal reactionaries who worked against the government's resistance and its policies. As a result, he aggressively called for "launching the masses to thoroughly reduce rent; to carry out interest rate reduction; to prepare to make progress toward land reform; and to achieve land-to-the-tillers." Only when these policies were fully enforced, would the VWP "be able to motivate the peasants to enthusiastically sacrifice for the resistance, step up production, and consolidate the rural government."¹¹³ Based on those premises, the conference issued a resolution to implement the VWP's land policies. Their fundamental mission was to "destroy the land ownership regime of the French colonialists and other invasive imperialists in Việt Nam, eliminate the feudal land ownership regime of landowners and foreign aliens, and implement the policies of land ownership by the peasantry."¹¹⁴ In order to prepare for the full enforcement of this policy in 1954, the resolution specified five main tasks to be implemented in 1953. The essence of these tasks was to purify and reorganize the Party at all levels, in order to strengthen the Party's ability to lead the mass mobilization campaign.¹¹⁵

This plenum marked the most important change in the VWP's resistance policy since 1945. By making the national resistance movement synonymous with both anti-

¹¹³ 'Báo cáo của tổng bí thư Trường Chinh tại hội nghị lần thứ tư ban chấp hành trung ương (khoá II) về mục đích, ý nghĩa, phương châm, phương pháp và kế hoạch thực hiện chính sách cải cách ruộng đất' [Report by Secretary General Trường Chinh at the Fourth Party Central Executive Committee Plenum regarding the purpose, meaning, guidelines, methods, and plans to implement the land reform policies]. ĐCSVN, vol. 14, p. 48-51, 30-83.

¹¹⁴ 'Nghị quyết của hội nghị lần thứ tư ban chấp hành trung ương Đảng lao động Việt Nam' [Resolution from the Fourth Party Central Executive Committee Plenum], 25-30, Jan. 1953. ĐCSVN, vol. 14, p. 129.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 128-132; 'Báo cáo của tổng bí thư Trường Chinh tại hội nghị lần thứ tư ban chấp hành trung ương (khoá II) về mục đích, ý nghĩa, phương châm, phương pháp và kế hoạch thực hiện chính sách cải cách ruộng đất' [Report by Secretary General Trường Chinh at the Fourth Party Central Executive Committee Plenum regarding the purpose, meaning, guidelines, methods, and plans to implement the land reform policies]. ĐCSVN, vol. 14, p. 55.

imperialism and anti-feudalism, it suggested that the two were intimately related and thus must also be simultaneously implemented. This more aggressive stance toward implementing land reform by means of mass mobilization was a significant shift from previous years, but as evidenced by Hồ's letters to Stalin and La Quý Ba's letter in 1952, it is not surprising. Furthermore, it could be argued that such a transformation was facilitated by the change in political conditions, as repeatedly defined in the VWP's political platform and earlier policies. When the Party's political and economic power was still weak, anti-imperialism and anti-feudalism were separated into two independent objectives as a means to utilize the landowning class' support to sustain the Party's feeble resistance forces. After a period of consolidation, by 1953, the united front policy was becoming unnecessary as the resistance forces gained strength. Consequently, the elimination and overthrow of the landowning class to advance the resistance became possible.¹¹⁶

Beginning with that plenum, successive mass mobilization initiatives were immediately undertaken to prepare for the upcoming land reforms. In February 1953, a national conference was convened on mobilizing the peasants and the people, to define the peasants' role in the resistance, enhance the ideological stance of the peasant class and set up the logistical means to lead the peasants during the resistance.¹¹⁷ A political re-education campaign was set up to rectify party members and administrative official's political thoughts and work styles.¹¹⁸ On March 16, 1953, the DRV issued a circular reforming the administrative system at the village level via the mass mobilization campaign. Building upon the previous tasks of

¹¹⁶Ibid., p. 54.

¹¹⁷ 'Bài nói tại hội nghị nông vận và dân vận toàn quốc' [Speech at the National Conference on mobilizing the peasants and people] given by Hồ Chí Minh, 5 Feb. 1953. ĐCSVN, vol. 14, p. 141-147.

¹¹⁸ 'Bài nói trong buổi khai mạc lớp chỉnh huấn cán bộ Đảng, dân, chính ở cơ quan trung ương' [Speech at the opening ceremony of the reeducation class], 6 Feb. 1953. ĐCSVN, vol. 14, p. 148-160.

reorganizing the cadres, dividing communes, and reforming cadres and officials' work styles, this directive aimed to form uncorrupted administrative authorities, tighten the relationship between the government and the people, and protect the economic interests and political advantage of the VWP in the rural areas.¹¹⁹ On April 12, Hồ Chí Minh signed three successive decrees to supplement the implementation of the VWP's land policies. Decree 149/SL prescribed specific land regulations (such as rent and interest rate reduction, land tenancy, land confiscation, and land redistribution) for which the masses were being mobilized.¹²⁰ Decree 150/SL established the Special People's Tribunal in areas implementing mass mobilization, to ensure the full implementation of the land policies, the maintenance of social order, and the strengthening of the People's government.¹²¹ Decree 151/SL defined the authority to punish (trừng trị) landowners who resisted or sabotaged the mass mobilization campaign, in order to maintain revolutionary order and to strengthen the solidarity of the people's resistance.¹²² The Prime Minister also issued two decrees, detailing regulations to implement the above decrees.

Immediately after issuing those decrees, the first experimental mass mobilization campaign was launched from April 15, 1953, to August 1953, in 22 communes in Interzone Việt Bắc and Interzone IV, specifically in Thái Nguyên province and Thanh Hoá province.¹²³ This was the beginning of eight successive

¹¹⁹ Viện Sử Học, *Việt Nam: những sự kiện lịch sử (1945-1975)* [Việt Nam: historical events (1945-1975)] (Việt Nam: NXBGD, 2002), p. 119.

¹²⁰ Sắc lệnh số 149/SL [Decree No. 149/SL]. 23 April 2010. <<http://luat.xalo.vn/phap-luat/Sac-lenh/122847910/Sac-lenh-Ve-viec-quy-dinh-ve-chinh-sach-ruong-dat.html>>.

¹²¹ Sắc lệnh số 150/SL [Decree No. 150/SL]. 23 April 2010. <<http://luat.xalo.vn/phap-luat/Sac-lenh/122849897/Sac-lenh-Ve-viec-thanh-lap-Toa-an-nhan-dan-Dac-biet-o-nhung-noi-phat-dong-quan-chung-thi-hanh-chinh-sach-ruong-dat.html>>.

¹²² Sắc lệnh số 151/SL [Decree No. 151/SL]. 23 April 2010. <<http://luat.xalo.vn/phap-luat/Sac-lenh/122851884/Sac-lenh-Ve-viec-trung-tri-dia-chu-chong-phap-luat-trong-khi-va-o-nhung-noi-phat-dong-quan-chung-thi-hanh-chinh-sach-ruong-dat.html>>.

¹²³ Note how the number of communes and the area of the campaign is significantly similar to that suggested by La Quý Ba in 1953; Viện Sử Học, *Việt Nam: những sự kiện lịch sử (1945-1975)* [Việt Nam: historical events (1945-1975)] (Việt Nam: NXBGD, 2002), p. 123.

waves of rent reduction that ended on December 31, 1955, during which 1,875 communes were mobilized.¹²⁴ Seven days later, the Party Secretariat issued a directive defining ten disciplinary clauses, specifying the exact logistics for cadres to carry out the mass mobilizations, to ensure the proper implementation of the VWP's land policies. The clauses may be divided into three separate subject-groups: five dealing with peasants, three with landowners, and two with Party members.¹²⁵ On April 24, 1953, the Party Central Executive Committee issued a directive on mass mobilization for 1953, detailing guidelines for the enforcement of decrees 149/SL, 150/SL and 151/SL. The bottom line was to rely on the strength of the poor and landless peasants to overthrow the influence of feudalism, win political control over rural areas, increase production, advance the resistance, and prepare for land reforms.¹²⁶ There were four necessary objectives: first, to formulate slogans for the struggle, based on the aspirations of the majority; second, to educate and organize the masses to make them self-aware and able to struggle voluntarily; third, to find and organize the faithful poor and landless peasants and groom them to be village leaders known as *cốt cán* ("backbone elements")¹²⁷ to help the Party govern; and fourth, to mobilize the peasants by establishing Peasants' Associations as the core organs of the movement. To achieve these objectives, cadres were obliged to have a thorough grasp of the Party's specific policy toward each class in the countryside. This required gaining the support of the middle class, poor and landless peasants, and pitching them

¹²⁴ Trần Phương, ed. *Cách mạng ruộng đất ở Việt Nam* [The land revolution in Vietnam] p. 107-108.

¹²⁵ 'Chỉ thị của ban bí thư về 10 điều kỷ luật của cán bộ trong khi thi hành chính sách ruộng đất' [Directive by the Party Secretariat on the 10 disciplines for cadres during the implementation of the land policies], 22 April 1953. ĐCSVN, vol. 14, p. 171-172.

¹²⁶ Lenin, Stalin, Mao Zedong. *Dựa Vào Bản Cố Nông Đoàn Kết Chặt Chẽ Với Trung Nông* [Rely on the poor and landless peasants, unite closely with the middle peasants] Việt Nam: Nhà Xuất Bản Sự Thật, 1953.

¹²⁷ A "Cốt cán" or "backbone element" is a peasant chosen by the local land-reform cadre to become a village leader.

against the rich peasants and landowners in order to eradicate the latter group's economic and political influence.¹²⁸

On May 4, 1953, the Party Politburo issued a directive stipulating five measures for mass mobilization. The focus was on defining Party and cadre's authority, and punishments for disciplining "cruel" and reactionary landowners. It set up the Disciplinary Committee (Ủy ban Xử trí), to investigate, collect and preserve information about offenders. This committee rendered opinions on how to punish offenders, and presented them to the President of the DRV for approval. Once approved, the Special People's Courts enforced the sentence. The aim was to punish reactionary agitators who committed crimes and sabotaged the resistance. Punishments were mainly based on class, but were sometimes made more lenient if the offender had a relationship with the resistance. Landowners who participated in or had family members in the resistance, and willingly implemented land reform and paid taxes were, according to a directive on July 13, 1953, exempt from persecution. Others who had merit with the resistance before and during the August Revolution or had children in the military were required to self-criticize and be criticized publicly, but were also exempted.¹²⁹ The ICP leadership determined the number of offenders who were to be executed. However, this percentage was not universally applied among all communes under mass mobilization, as some communes had 3 to 4 landowners executed, while others executed just one or none. Executions were kept to a minimum, due to the fear of losing the public's sympathy.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ 'Chỉ thị ban chấp hành trung ương về phát động quần chúng trong năm 1953' [Directive from the Central Executive Committee regarding mass mobilization in 1953], 24 April 1953. ĐCSVN, vol. 14, p. 173-176.

¹²⁹ 'Chỉ thị của bộ chính trị về việc lập danh sách các thân sĩ tiến bộ và cách xử trí với họ' [Directive from the Politburo on listing progressive notables and how to deal with them], 13 July 1953. ĐCSVN, vol. 14, p. 258-261.

¹³⁰ 'Chỉ thị của bộ chính trị về mấy vấn đề đặc biệt trong phát động quần chúng' [Directive by the Politburo on several special issues regarding mass mobilization], 4 May, 1953. ĐCSVN, vol. 14, p. 201-203.

After a short experimental period of implementing mass mobilization to reduce rents, the Politburo issued a resolution in August 1953 to improve the mass mobilization campaign.¹³¹ That resolution was followed by a more detailed directive issued on September 7, 1953, which identified the steps, methods, and requirements needed to mobilize the masses to demand rent reduction and to lay the transitional groundwork for land reforms. Significantly different from the more conservative measures of previous years, these steps were intended to be quick, robust, and simple, but also to achieve good results. The process was divided into five steps: 1) propagate, educate, and recruit rễ (“root” cadres); 2) train and educate the roots (rễ), to choose the objects of persecution; 3) organize stringing beads (xâu chuỗi), for a preliminary reorganization of local institutions; 4) overturn cruel village bullies (cường hào gian ác), and redistribute confiscated items; 5) rectify village organization, educate the peasants, and divide communes. The whole process was required to be implemented within a concentrated area, and advanced in consecutive waves to avoid their previous mistakes of overextension and jumping ahead.¹³² To accelerate the process, the August resolution required that each wave of rent reduction and mobilization be carried out and completed in a period of two months.¹³³

On November 10, 1953, the Party Secretariat issued a directive on reorganizing the rural Party cells (chi bộ) during mass mobilization. The Party cells were divided into three categories. The good Party cells were those that could definitely be counted on to mobilize the masses. The regular Party cells were primarily under Party control,

¹³¹ ‘Nghị quyết của hội nghị bộ chính trị về chỉnh đốn công tác phát động quần chúng’ [Resolution by the Politburo Conference on rectification of the task of mass mobilization]. ĐCSVN, vol. 14, p. 277-293.

¹³² ‘Chỉ thị của bộ chính trị về bước tiến, phương pháp và yêu cầu cụ thể trong phát động quần chúng giảm tô’ [Directive from the Politburo on the concrete steps, methods, and requirements for advancing mass mobilization], 7 Sept. 1953. ĐCSVN, vol. 14, p. 320-333.

¹³³ ‘Nghị quyết của hội nghị bộ chính trị về chỉnh đốn công tác phát động quần chúng’ [Resolution by the Politburo Conference on rectification of the task of mass mobilization]. ĐCSVN, vol. 14, p. 293.

but had been penetrated and influenced by landowners and bullies, while the bad Party cells were under the complete control of the landowners and bullies, with very few loyal and effective members. Individual party members were also ranked according to three categories of bad, weak, and good. The bad members were the spies, disloyal reactionaries, and elements who came from the exploitive class. Weak members had a clean record, but in general were uneducated and unwilling to improve. The good members were more educated and more experienced, and had the potential to advance in rank. With such a diverse mix of members within the Party cells, the VWP leaders had to carry out a reorganization to purify and strengthen the foundation of the Party at the rural level and to prepare more favorable circumstances needed for the future implementation of land reforms. Two requirements were necessary in order to realize this aim. First, party members needed to understand the boundary between themselves and their enemies (imperialists, traitors, and reactionaries) and their particular relationship with the peasants opposed to the landowners, in order to recognize their obligations toward the Party and the peasant masses. Second, the Party had to expel elements such as traitors, reactionaries and cruel village bullies, landowners, and rich peasants who committed political crimes against the party and the government. In addition, the directive also prescribed detailed policies to deal with each type of member.¹³⁴

At the Fifth Plenum of the Party Central Executive Committee and the First National Conference from November 11 to 23, 1953, the VWP leaders convened and decided to use a supplemented version of the land program drafted at the Fourth Plenum in January 1953, to launch a systematic and sweeping land reform program. Hồ Chí Minh, in his report to the conference, defined the objectives of pushing the

¹³⁴ ‘Chỉ thị của ban bí thư về chính đôn chi bộ nông thôn trong phát động quần chúng’ [Directive by the Party Secretariat on reorganizing the rural Party cells in mass mobilization], 10 Nov. 1953. ĐCSVN, vol. 14, p. 356-364.

resistance forward and carrying out land reform as the two central tasks for 1954.¹³⁵ Trường Chinh, in an elaborate report entitled “Implementation of Land Reform,” outlined the terms of the land reform policy and the methods for implementing land reform in Việt Nam.¹³⁶ Both Hồ Chí Minh and Trường Chinh insisted that in order to be able to implement land reform, class boundaries must be clearly defined, to differentiate between “ta” (us) and “địch” (the enemy). This class boundary inevitably forged a class struggle between the peasants (“ta”) against the landowners (“địch,”), and thus shaped the content of the Land Reform Law ratified by the DRV National Assembly on December 4, 1953, into a regulation promoting a widespread and aggressive class struggle.¹³⁷

Table 3.1: Waves of Rent Reduction and Land Reform

Sources: Land Reform data from Trần Phương (1968), p. 107-108. Rent Reduction data from various reports, including Trần Phương’s total estimation.

Rent Reduction Wave (RR)	Land Reform Wave (LR)	Dates	Villages	
			RR	LR
1		April-May 1953	22	---
2		Aug.-Oct. 1953	163	---
3	Experimental	25/12/53-30/03/54	---	6
4			572	---
5	1	25/05/54-20-09-54	---	53
6	2	23/10/54-15/01/55	255	210
7	3	18/02/55-20/06/55	344	466
8	4	27/06/55-31/12/55	519	859

¹³⁵ ‘Báo cáo của chủ tịch Hồ Chí Minh về tình hình trước mắt và nhiệm vụ cải cách ruộng đất’ [Report by Hồ Chí Minh on the present situation and the task of land reform]. ĐCSVN, vol. 14, p. 369-383.

¹³⁶ ‘Thực hiện cải cách ruộng đất’ [Implementation of land reform] a report read by Trường Chinh at the Fifth Party Central Executive Committee Plenum. ĐCSVN, vol. 14, p. 384-456.

¹³⁷ ‘Luật cải cách ruộng đất năm 1953’ [Land Reform Law for 1953]. QHNCHXHCNVN, vol 1. p. 396; As defined in Article I, the objective and purpose was “to abolish the regime of land appropriation by the French colonists and wipe out the feudal regime of land ownership by the landowning class, in order to set up a regime of land ownership by the peasants, give a strong impetus to agricultural production, pave the way for industrial and commercial development, and improve the peasants’ living conditions,” and support the resistance.

Table 3.1 (Continued)

	5	25/12/55-30/07/56	---	1720
Total			1875	3314

Table 3.2: The number of xã (village/commune) undergoing land reform in each province, by waves

Source: Trần Phương (1968), p. 107-108.

Wave	Area of Implementation	No. of xã being implemented	Total No. of xã in each wave
Experimental	Thái Nguyên	6	6
Wave 1	Thái Nguyên	47	53
	Thanh Hoá	6	
Wave 2	Thái Nguyên	22	210
	Phú Thọ	100	
	Bắc Giang	22	
	Thanh Hoá	66	
Wave 3	Phú Thọ	106	466
	Bắc Giang	84	
	Vĩnh Phúc	65	
	Sơn Tây	22	
	Thanh Hoá	115	
	Nghệ An	74	
Wave 4	Phú Thọ	17	859
	Bắc Giang	116	
	Vĩnh Phúc	111	
	Bắc Ninh	60	
	Sơn Tây	71	
	Hà Nam	98	
	Ninh Bình	47	
	Thanh Hoá	207	
	Nghệ An	5	
	Hà Tĩnh	227	
Wave 5	Bắc Ninh	86	1,720
	Hải Dương	217	
	Hưng Yên	149	
	Thái Bình	294	
	Kiên An	85	
	Ninh Bình	45	
	Hà Đông	163	
	Nam Định	171	

Table 3.2 (Continued)

	Thanh Hoá	19	
	Nghệ An	250	
	Hà Tĩnh	6	
	Quang Bình	118	
	Vĩnh Linh zone	21	
	Hà Nội	47	
	Hải Phòng	9	
	Hồng Quang zone	40	
Total			3,314

As shown in Table 3.1 and Table 3.2, following the ratification of this law, the DRV immediately carried out an experimental wave of Land Reform between December 25, 1953 and March 1954 in six villages in Thái Nguyên province. This was followed by five waves of reform, known as the Land Reform Proper campaign, which lasted until July 30, 1956. During this time, 3,314 villages were reformed.¹³⁸ The first person executed was Nguyễn Thị Năm, a female landowner from Thái Nguyên province. She was famously known as *mẹ kháng chiến* (mother of the resistance) for her strong merits with the revolution.¹³⁹

The period from 1950 to 1953 could be seen as an interim phase between the earlier united front line and the later anti-feudalist/distributionalist line. There was a steady coagulation of policy with actual realization of earlier policies. The Communist Party had begun to further consolidate its position via the purification of its own organization, the training of more cadres to prepare for the land reform campaigns, and the reorganization of the fundamental rural administrative structure. All these factors combined, led to the beginning of major mass mobilization necessary

¹³⁸ Trần Phương, ed. *Cách mạng ruộng đất ở Việt Nam* [The land revolution in Vietnam] p. 107-108.

¹³⁹ Nguyễn Quang Duy. 'Bà Cát Thành Long Nguyễn Thị Năm và ông Hồ Chí Minh' [Cat Thanh Long Nguyen Thi Nam and Ho Chi Minh]. *Dân Luận*. 03 July 2010. 20 July 2010. <<http://danluan.org/node/5567>>

to destroy the remaining opponents (via land reform), to transform the rural power over to the Party, and to establish the preconditions for the transition to socialism.

CHAPTER FOUR

PLANS FOR MASS MOBILIZATION: THE STORY OF “THREE TOGETHERS”

This chapter depicts the process of mass mobilization and how this process ignited a class struggle among the different social classes in rural Việt Nam.¹⁴⁰ *Phát động quần chúng* (mass mobilization) was the most important process in the Vietnamese land reform program. Its goals were to mobilize the poor and landless peasants to overturn the economic and political influence of feudalism, to win political dominance for the Party, and subsequently to establish a proletarian dictatorship in the countryside. The campaign was applied both during the land rent reduction phase and the Land Reform Proper phase. Almost identical techniques were used in both phases, with the only notable differences being an increase in the level of violence and a broadening of the types of property subject to confiscation.¹⁴¹ The process was tightly and uniformly organized and directed. Between 1953 and 1956, it was extended to most village-communes in rural North Việt Nam. Each commune underwent mass mobilization under the supervision of a *đội công tác* (work team) that reported to the VWP's central authorities, with the intention of suppressing the economically wealthy and politically influential rural bourgeoisie.

Mass mobilization consisted of a systematic series of actions that began with the central authorities carefully selecting a site, usually a xã (commune). To launch a successful campaign, the xã had to be a place in which the military and political

¹⁴⁰ The sources used for this chapter derived from interviews with local Vietnamese who had experienced the land reform. It included accounts from Lý Thị Diệu from Thanh Hoá, Trần Văn Tôn from Thái Nguyên, Bùi Thị Đào from Ninh Bình, Nguyễn Hữu Lộc from Thanh Hoá, Đặng Minh from Hà Nội, Lê Cẩm Ninh from Phú Thọ, Nguyễn Thị Soan from Thanh Hoá, Phan Văn Lưu from Bắc Ninh.

¹⁴¹ The Land Rent Reduction campaign was implemented in eight waves, between April 1953 and December 31, 1955. The Land Reform Proper campaign was implemented in six waves (including the experimental wave) from December 25, 1953 to July 30, 1956. Mass mobilization was carried out during both campaigns.

situation was comparatively stable. After selecting the site, a *đội* (team) of specially trained mass-mobilization cadres were sent into the *xã*. Through the local Party cell, the *đội* surveyed the general situation in the *xã*, reformed organizations, convened various meetings, and publicized government policies to the population. Throughout the process, particular attention was given to social groups deemed likely to be useful for later mobilization efforts. Disguised as peasants, members of the cadres went down to the masses to mobilize them and investigate the conditions in each *xã*. They sought out 15 to 20 of the poorest peasants or laborers in the *xã*, making direct contact with these people by asking for permission to live in their houses.¹⁴² They then applied the ‘three togethers’ strategy which included *cùng ăn* (eating together), *cùng ở* (living together), and *cùng làm* (working together) with the peasants and their families.

The cadre usually stayed in the *xã* for an extended period of about two to three months, and acquainted themselves with peasant tasks of all kinds. Using the tactic of *thăm nghèo hỏi khổ* (visiting the poor and asking about their sufferings), they probed into the peasants’ poverty.¹⁴³ The emphasis of this strategy was twofold: by probing into every detail of their hosts’ lives, the cadres were able to investigate, at the individual level, the conditions, the socio-political makeup, and especially the class relationships between the rich (landowners) and the poor (peasants) in the commune. Moreover, by inquiring into the grievances of the poor, the cadres would try to win over their hosts’ trust and hearts, and thus be able to start mobilizing the peasants into action. Emphasizing the peasants’ poverty versus the landowners’ abundance, the cadres indoctrinated the peasants into the cause of social and class disparities.

¹⁴² ‘Chỉ thị của bộ chính trị về bước tiến, phương pháp và yêu cầu cụ thể trong phát động quần chúng giảm tô’ [Directive from the Politburo on the concrete steps, methods, and requirements in advancing mass mobilization], 7 Sept. 1953. ĐCSVN, vol. 14, p. 324.

¹⁴³ ‘Nghị quyết của hội nghị bộ chính trị về chỉnh đốn công tác phát động quần chúng’ [Resolution by the Politburo Conference on rectification of the task of mass mobilization]. ĐCSVN, vol. 14, p. 293.

Blaming the landowners, they convinced the peasants that all their bad luck and sufferings were caused by the cruel and ruthless landowners' exploitation, and not fate. Through such psychological manipulation, the cadres instilled into the minds of the peasants the ideological cause of exploitation and suffering, and ignited in them the resentment and hatred necessary for a class struggle against the landowners.

They continued, day and night, to intensively indoctrinate the docile peasants, until these peasants understood that the only way to improve their lives was to support the causes of the Party, which included overturning their vile exploiters. The ideologically mobilized peasant was called *rễ* (root). Once the peasant was fully instilled with resentment towards landowners, the cadre withdrew from the peasant's house and ceased all direct involvement in the village. From here on, the cadre carried out its mission by employing the roots as its mobilization agent, ordering them to recruit other poor and landless peasants. The newly mobilized peasants were labeled *chuỗi* (beads). This chain recruiting process was called *bắt rễ xâu chuỗi* (growing roots and stringing beads). The roots, being the most important element in the whole program, also had the responsibility of connecting with cadres from nearby villages to exchange information. Every detail of village life was thoroughly investigated and documented, whether it be about land ownership or about a person randomly fishing at a local pond, because such information, no matter how irrelevant and flawed, could be used during public denunciations. As the core instrument of mass mobilization was established, and hatred of the landowners was implanted, the cadres relied on the poor peasants to draw out the middle class peasants, and to organize a commune Peasants' Association. This Peasants' Association was directed to begin mobilizing the remainder of the people to struggle against and overthrow the landowners, traitors, reactionaries, and bullies. This process effectively organized the mobilizing entities needed to incite the class struggle, and also relieved the cadres from the responsibility

of having to directly carry out the action. This gave the public impression that the movement was naturally spurred by the peasants' own desires to overthrow the landowning class.¹⁴⁴

After amassing enough information about a village, a member of the cadre would make a personal report before a Provincial Party Committee (tỉnh ủy). There, with the consultation of the Committee, he profiled and classified the population of the village. He identified the landowners, and imputed to them whatever crimes were necessary to put them on trial. Starting from this point, the *đoàn cải cách ruộng đất* (land reform battalion) arrived to take on full responsibility for supervising village affairs. It appointed the *cốt cán* (backbone elements—the trained roots and beads) to barricade and police the whole village, cutting off all unauthorized communication in and out of the village, while they awaited the rulings from the higher authorities.

Once approved by the higher authorities, the campaign of population classification officially began. This process involved the training of poor and landless peasants on how to classify the village population into different classes and categories. For guidance, the government provided the peasants with documents of regulations and specific methods.¹⁴⁵ After days of intensive study and discussion, those who attended the course deliberated on the classification of landowners, which were carefully divided into three classes: traitorous, reactionary, and cruel landowners; ordinary landowners; and resistance landowners (those who participated in the

¹⁴⁴ ‘Chỉ thị của ban chấp hành trung ương về phát động quần chúng trong năm 1953’ [Directive by the Party Central Executive Committee regarding mass mobilization in 1953]. ĐCSVN, vol. 14, p. 187.

¹⁴⁵ Sources for training cadres and peasants included: *Vì đâu tôi khổ* [Why am I suffering?], *Đường Lối Phát Động Quần Chúng* [The ways to launch the masses], *Đội Về Đây Đời Ta Tươi Sáng: Tiến Lên* [Our lives have brightened since the team arrived: march forward], *Coi Chùng Địa Chủ Rất Ngoan Cố* [Watchout, the landowners are very stubborn], *Nhớ Lấy Để Trả Thù: Tôi Có 12 Anh Em Nay Chỉ Còn Một Mình Tôi* [Remember to take revenge: I have 12 siblings and I am the only survivor], *Phải Đánh Đổ Chúng Nó* [Must overthrow them], *Truyện Chị Khoan: gương mẫu trong phát động quần chúng* [The story of sister Khoan: an exemplary of mass mobilization], *Vùng Lên* [Revolt], *Kinh Nghiệm về Phong Pháp Lãnh Đạo Trong Việc Cải Cách Ruộng Đất của Lưu-Trần-Bản* [Experience and methods to lead in land reform by Lưu Trần Bản].

Resistance).¹⁴⁶ In practice, most if not all of the landowners, even those who had served the DRV administration or had been decorated by Hồ Chí Minh for their achievements, were placed in the first class and charged with crimes, irrespective of their previous relationship with the resistance.¹⁴⁷ However, this discrimination was not absolute, as anyone's class status could be raised or lowered, depending largely on his/her attitude during the mobilization campaign. As a result, many landowners became humble and obedient. However, a large number of landowners still could not escape trial for treason, because the campaign had previously stipulated a fixed number of death sentences and terms of penal servitude.¹⁴⁸ After the head of the landowning family had been arrested, the cadres would fabricate accusations to exert pressure on the family members, primarily to extort money and jewelry. Besides losing their property and enduring various modes of humiliation and mistreatment, members of the landowners' families were also isolated from having any contact with anyone. This included preventing them from working outside the house, thus leading to many deaths due to starvation.¹⁴⁹

During this process, peasants attended special classes on exposing crimes, in which they were taught how the landowners had cheated, robbed, exploited, and oppressed them. They were provided with a long list of typical crimes, to use to accuse and incriminate the landowners for whom they had previously worked. Those who were specifically trained came to be known as 'denouncers'. Each denouncer had to make at least one accusation against the landowner on trial. These denouncers

¹⁴⁶ All landowners who remained in the Communist zone up to 1953 had, played some part in the Resistance, whether they wanted to or not, since Communist policy was such that nobody could remain completely inactive.

¹⁴⁷ Exemplify by the case of Nguyễn Thị Năm from Thái Nguyên province. She was a resistance landowner who had strong credentials with the revolution, but was the first person to be executed in Land Reform.

¹⁴⁸ 'Chỉ thị của bộ chính trị về mấy vấn đề đặc biệt trong phát động quần chúng' [Directive by the Politburo regarding several special issues in mass mobilization]. ĐCSVN, vol. 14, p. 201-202.

¹⁴⁹ Hoàng Văn Chí, *From Colonialism to Communism* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1964), p. 156-157.

could be roughly placed into three categories. The first were people who were drawn in by the promise of material rewards or political privileges. The second were those who wished to protect themselves and avoid trouble. Lastly were those who denounced other due to fear of being falsely accused themselves or found guilty by association. The mass mobilization campaign was so thorough and caused so much fear that it left very few, if any, choices for people living in the communes being mobilized. It did not matter whether they agreed or not; they were all obligated to participate in one manner or another.

After compiling their lists of crimes attributed to the landowners, the ‘denouncers’ were given careful training on public denunciation, to help make their denunciations look more convincing before the accused in the presence of a multi-village crowd that could extend from ten to twenty thousand people. Under the guidance and supervision of a cadre, the denouncers practiced their roles by rehearsing verbal phrases, delivering pre-drafted speeches that they had memorized, and performing bodily gestures and actions in front of a straw dummy to create a sense of realism and sincerity. The denunciation trial would begin once all the preparations were completed and the date of denouncing was assigned. On the denouncing day, a multi-village crowd of ten to twenty thousand peasants would amass in an open field. The crowd sat on the ground facing the tribunal. The president of the tribunal would open the denunciation by declaring the task of overthrowing the traitorous and reactionary landowners who for thousands of years had exploited and oppressed them. The president would then give an order, and the accused would be brought before the tribunal. The president then called upon people from the crowd, usually the trained peasants who had rehearsed their denunciation during the days leading up to the trial, to come up and denounce the accused. Denouncers would arise, start pointing fingers at the accused, and denounce the accused with accusations and insults. The

landowners, however, were not allowed to reply to the accusations or to defend themselves. The denunciations would last from one day to three consecutive days or nights, depending on the crime being accused, with each day or night being reserved for a specific type of crime (economic crimes, moral crimes, and political crimes). However, denunciations are usually carried out at night to avoid being spotted by enemy troops. A few days following the denunciation, a Special People's Tribunal would come to the village to try those recently denounced by the peasants. This tribunal, which was comprised entirely of poor and uneducated peasants who knew very little about judicial procedures, imposed sentences on the accused. The sentences generally varied from the death penalty to hard labor and imprisonment, and generally included the confiscation of property.

Once the phase of denouncing the landowning class ended, the Party had successfully removed rural Việt Nam's most influential elements and had struck terror into the hearts of the entire rural population. Consequently, the cadres began carrying out the government's land policies of rent and interest rate reduction, rent refunds, collecting payment for unpaid labor, collecting taxes, and reforming the rural land ownership system by confiscating land from the landowning class and redistributing it to the poor and landless peasants. They purged all the influential elements from the commune administrative organizations, reformed the organizations, and consolidated the commune's political organizations.

In general, by rigorously instigating the process of mass mobilization, the Party differentiated the rural social classes and infused hatred of one class against another, to inspire the intense class struggle needed to uproot the foundation of rural society — the landowner. By masterminding the whole process, the Party treacherously decided to make a 180-degree turn against the very people that had helped sustain it. Thus, poignantly, it confirmed that the root cause of social unrest and insurgency in rural

North Việt Nam was not raised from the bottom, but instead forcefully imposed from the top, regardless of the consequences. Consequences were so tense and so strange that “fathers would run and hide at the sight of their children, and relatives would not dare to even look at each other’s faces when they met.”¹⁵⁰

¹⁵⁰ Nguyễn thị Soan. Thanh Hoá Province, 05 Feb. 2009.

CONCLUSION

Through looking at the formulation of the VWP's land reform policies during the resistance period chronologically, between 1945 and 1953, this paper sought to bring to light the importance of these earlier years as the foundational phases of the implementation of the formal Land Reform program and the process of consolidating organizational power in rural North Việt Nam. North Việt Nam was embroiled in a protracted resistance war against France, and its success was considered of paramount importance to the sustainability of the VWP's ruling authority. To be successful, the war effort required that a broad united front of all social groups be maintained to support it with two essential needs—the manpower to fight the war, and the production of agricultural surpluses necessary to feed the forces. Thus, from 1945 to 1949, the communists' 'land-to-the-tiller' policy was initially limited to merely mitigating the peasant's poor conditions, by means of rent and interest rate reductions, and temporary reallocation of lands belonging to French colonialists and Vietnamese traitors/collaborators. Converging developments in 1948 and 1949 also placed a greater emphasis on the idea of investigating the rural areas, mobilizing the masses to reduce rents, and restructuring the rural administrative organizations. Nevertheless, these policies were conservatively applied to appease the interests of both the rich and the poor, and thus did not yield much success in terms of redistributing lands to the poor. However, once the political and military situation improved, the agrarian policies also began to take on a more forceful turn, as the four-year period from 1950 to 1953 marked the most significant fundamental shift in the ICP's agrarian policies. Influenced by changing international pressures and national conditions favoring the resistance, more extensive and insistent policies were developed and

implemented to set the theatrical stage for a class struggle, and the consolidation of Party power in rural North Việt Nam.

The shift from uniting all social classes for the greater interests of the nation, to the destruction of this very unity to consolidate power, vividly exemplified the intentions and abilities of the VWP's leaders to balance the objectives of winning the resistance and preparing the preconditions for instituting drastic social, economic, and political change. It also epitomized the opportunistic character of the VWP when it decided to accept all 'necessary evils' in the process of building socialism. The outcome was a deliberately orchestrated class antagonism that provoked widespread dismay, and affected the economic, political, sentimental, and ideological well-being and safety of every person in rural North Việt Nam at the time. The ensuing consternation could be expressed as "sky-shaking and earth-shattering."

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GLOSSARY

Vietnamese terms in the thesis

bắt rễ xâu chuỗi	“Getting (growing) roots and stringing beads” (recruiting activists among the peasants, and then sending them out to recruit further activists themselves).
bộ	The three geographical units into which Việt Nam was divided before 1954 (Bắc-bộ, Trung-bộ, and Nam-bộ)
cải cách ruộng đất	Land reform.
chi bộ	A base-level (usually village-level) branch of the Lao Workers’ Party.
chỉ tiêu	Target.
chuỗi	“Bead”—a peasant activist recruited by another peasant native to the village, not by an outside land-reform cadre.
công điền	Public, communal land.
cột cán	“Backbone element”—a peasant chosen by the land reform cadres to become a village leader. The cột cán had usually been the rễ.
cụm	A grouping of several đội within a land reform đoàn (brigade).
đảng	The party—usually refer to the communist party.
đoàn	“Brigade”—a brigade of land reform cadres was responsible for land reform in a considerable area, not necessary limited to a single province.
đội	“Team”—one team of land reform cadres was responsible for one administrative village.

huyện	District—an administrative unit intermediate between the province and the administrative village.
khu	Zone—usually refers to a group of several provinces.
liên khu	Interzone—a group of several provinces.
lúa chiêm	5 th lunar month rice.
lúa mùa	10 th lunar month rice.
nhân dân	The people.
nông dân	Tiller, peasant.
rễ	“Root”—a peasant recruited as an activist by a land reform cadre.
sắc lệnh	Decree.
tá điền	Tenant; sharecropper.
thăm nghèo hỏi khổ	To share poverty and inquire about sufferings. Procedure used by land-reform cadres to get to know individual peasants.
thôn	Hamlet.
tịch thu	Confiscate.
tỉnh	Province.
trung ương	The center/central (government).
trưng mua	Compulsory purchase.
trưng thu	Requisition (confiscation without compensation)
trừng trị	Punish.
ủy ban hành chính	Administrative committee.
xã	Administrative village or commune.
xóm	An administrative unit within the xã.
xử trí	“To deal with,” in the sense of “to punish.”
xử tử	To sentence to death.