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Vietnamese Land Reform: The Domestic Impetus to Communist Compromises at Geneva, 1954

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**Introduction**

Fighting for fifty-five consecutive days and nights, Vietnamese resistance forces – the Vietminh – scored a devastating victory over the French at Dienbienphu on May 7, 1954. The chains of 100 years of French colonialism were close to being broken; long awaited independence and unification appeared to be at hand. One day after the historic victory, the Vietnamese entered negotiations for an end to the war at Geneva, seemingly in a position of strength after almost nine years of successful warfare against the French.

Yet, as the historian Marilyn Young stated, the final settlement of the 1954 Geneva Conference “reflected neither the aspirations of the Vietnamese people nor the military and political victory of the Viet Minh.”<sup>1</sup> According to the terms of the agreement, Vietnam was temporarily divided into two “regrouping zones” along the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel.<sup>2</sup> The Vietminh was to relocate its forces to the North, the French to the South.

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<sup>1</sup> Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars: 1945-1990* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), 37.

<sup>2</sup> The Accords called for free general elections to reunify the nation in two years (July 1956) under the supervision of an international commission composed of Polish, Canadian, and Indian representatives. Specific articles prohibited the introduction of additional military personnel, troop reinforcements, ammunition, arms, and new military bases or bases under foreign control into the two regrouping zones and also forbade the two civil administrations from entering military alliances. “The Geneva Cease-Fire,” July 20, 1954, in *Vietnam and America: A Documented History*, 2d ed., Marvin Gettleman and others, ed. (New York: Grove Press, 1995), 70-72.

The settlement also called for the withdrawal of Vietnamese and French forces from Laos and Cambodia, as well as the neutralization of both countries under their existing royal governments. The Pathet Lao, though, was allocated “two small, underpopulated regroupment zones,” but the space hardly reflected the party’s actual military control over the country. Young, *Vietnam Wars*, 41. Perhaps most importantly, the “Final Declaration of the Geneva Conference” stressed that the military demarcation line was “provisional” and “should not in any way be interpreted as constituting a political or territorial boundary.” “Final Declaration of the Geneva Conference,” July 21, 1954, in *Vietnam and America*,

Acceptance of the seventeenth parallel, rather than the thirteenth or fourteenth, represented a setback, considering the land in between included such notable cities as Hue, the ancient imperial capital, and Danang. As the historian Harold C. Hinton pointed out, the thirteenth or fourteenth “would have corresponded fairly closely with the actual military situation.”<sup>3</sup>

One prominent question that arose from the Geneva settlement was why the leaders of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam compromised so many of their initial demands and goals, including the one seemingly most dear to them – national unification. Examinations of the DRV’s compromises at Geneva in the existing historical scholarship of the Vietnamese Revolution focus almost exclusively on the Cold War context in which the demands for independence were heard.<sup>4</sup> Certainly, the realities of the Cold War had a significant impact on the negotiations at Geneva, particularly the threat of a direct United States military intervention. In a report given by Ho Chi Minh to the Sixth Plenum of the Vietnam Workers’ Party (VWP)<sup>5</sup> on July 15, 1954, Ho called on the Party to “take firm

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Gettleman et al., ed., 75. The State of Vietnam did not sign the agreements, a stipulation the United States would later use to back Ngo Dinh Diem and the Republic of Vietnam’s refusal to honor the Geneva Accords and the national elections scheduled for 1956.

<sup>3</sup> Extract from Harold C. Hinton, *Communist China in World Politics, in China’s Foreign Relations Since 1949*, Alan Lawrance (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), 135.

<sup>4</sup> Qiang Zhai’s book, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000) discusses the Geneva Conference exclusively in terms of the role of Zhou Enlai and Chinese pressure. In fact, the heading for his section on Geneva is entitled, “Zhou Enlai and the Geneva Conference.” Exclusive Cold War interpretations of the Geneva Conference can also be found in Marilyn Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990*, William Duiker’s, *Communist Road to Power in Vietnam* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1996), William Pinckney’s, *The Endless War: Fifty Years of Struggle in Vietnam* (New York: The Free Press, 1982), Joseph Buttinger’s, *Vietnam: A Political History* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1968), and King Chen, *Vietnam and China, 1938-1954* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969). All of these texts mention the threat of an American invasion and pressure from the “socialist bloc” as the main factors in the DRV’s decision to compromise.

<sup>5</sup> The Vietnamese Communists had several different names for the party between 1930 and 1954. In February 1930, largely because of Ho Chi Minh’s leadership, the three competing communist parties of Vietnam (Indochinese Communist Party, Annam Communist Party, and the Indochinese Communist League) merged together to form the Vietnam Communist Party (VCP). Under guidance from the Comintern, a Soviet organization created by Lenin in 1919 to give leadership to the world socialist movement, the Party changed its name to the Indochinese Communist Party in October 1930. From 1930

hold of the banner of peace to oppose the U.S. imperialists' policy of direct interference in, and prolongation and expansion of, the war in Indochina...."<sup>6</sup> He further chided cadres who "intoxicated with our repeated victories, want to fight on at all costs." These cadres, Ho noted, "see the French but not the Americans."<sup>7</sup>

The DRV's socialist brethren, the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, also applied intense pressure on Pham Van Dong and the leaders of the Vietnam Workers' Party to moderate their stance to avoid an American expansion of the war.<sup>8</sup> The Chinese, in particular, had fresh memories of the brutal Korean War and did not want to get involved in a similar conflict that would divert precious economic and human resources away from domestic issues and economic rehabilitation. As the historian Qiang Zhai pointed out in his book, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975*, the leaders of the DRV were in no position to alienate the People's Republic of China at the Geneva Conference in light of the crucial role Chinese assistance played in their victory over the French and their future need for assistance in the rebuilding of the country after the settlement. "Between 1950-1954, Beijing sent some of its most capable generals to Vietnam as military and political advisors; they helped the DRV professionalize and politicize its army, reorganize its administrative structure, establish a sound financial

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to 1951, the Party operated under the ICP name. In 1941, however, the Party, in an attempt to form a multi-class alliance against imperialism, formed the Vietminh Front. The Party attempted to cloak its role and move away from overt communist leadership in order to attract moderate nationalist into the Front. The Vietminh lasted for a decade. In 1951, the Party reaffirmed the Marxist-Leninist orientation of the Revolution and formed the Vietnam Workers' Party (VWP).

<sup>6</sup> "Report by Ho Chi Minh to the Sixth Plenum of the Party Central Committee," July 15, 1954, in Gareth Porter, ed., *Vietnam: The Definitive Documentation of Human Decisions*, Vol. 1, (Stanfordville, New York: Earl M. Coleman Enterprises, 1979), 635.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 636.

<sup>8</sup> I use the term "leaders of the Vietnam Workers' Party" to refer to the major actors in the Communist leadership, most notably Ho Chi Minh, Truong Chinh, Vo Nguyen Giap, and Pham Van Dong. Later, when Truong Chinh was relieved of his post as General Secretary in 1956, Le Duan would be promoted to the central leadership in Hanoi.

policy, and mobilize the masses.”<sup>9</sup> In addition, Chinese military advisers “planned and often helped direct Viet Minh operations,” and, as a whole, the Chinese Military Advisory Group “contributed greatly to the success of the border, Northwest, and Dien Bien Phu engagements.”<sup>10</sup>

Other historians have suggested that the practical side of Ho Chi Minh played a key role in the compromises at Geneva, namely that Ho was buying time to regroup his forces and giving the Vietnamese people a much needed break after almost fifteen years of constant warfare. Statements made by Ho Chi Minh during key discussions with Vo Nguyen Giap and Zhou Enlai from July 3 to July 5 at Liuzhou gives evidence to both his fears of an American intervention and claims that he was buying time to regroup his forces. In agreeing with Zhou about the need for compromise, Ho stated:

We must have good talks with France to obtain peace before U.S. November elections take place because the United States has misgivings about intervention. After November, we are not certain what its position will be. Vietnam is at a crossroad of peace and war. Our main direction is to win peace and prepare for war.<sup>11</sup>

William J. Duiker, author of the biography *Ho Chi Minh*, also noted the practical,

“making peace to go forward” claim for Ho’s willingness to compromise at Geneva:

His willingness to accept a compromise peace en route to his final objective is reminiscent of his views on previous occasions, notably at the end of the Pacific War. Ho Chi Minh recognized that national independence and unity for the Vietnamese nation could not be achieved in isolation, but must be achieved in the context of complex changes taking place on the world’s stage.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Qiang Zhai, *China and Vietnam*, 63.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>12</sup> Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh* (New York: Hyperion, 2000) 461.

Some historians have also suggested that Ho Chi Minh and the Party leadership made the compromises because they felt the free and general election provision of the settlement would result in a Communist victory with Ho as the president of an independent, united Vietnam. The Accords did clearly state that the military demarcation line was “provisional” and “should not be in any way be interpreted as constituting a political or territorial boundary,” and the DRV leadership stressed this in repeated appeals after the conference about the transition from military to political struggle. Yet, as Ang Cheng Guan stated in the beginning of her book, *Vietnamese Communists’ Relations with China and the Second Indochina Conflict*, “The Vietnamese Communist leadership...knew from the beginning that the general election stipulated in the 1954 Geneva Agreements would not take place.” She cited the 6th Plenary Session of the Vietnam Workers’ Party (July 15-18, 1954) as evidence of Hanoi’s implicit acknowledgement that it would be unlikely to reunite the country in 1956 by election in the face of American imperialism.<sup>13</sup> Ang Cheng Guan also noted a Spring 1959 meeting in which Le Duan told Janos Radvanyi that “no one in Hanoi had been surprised when the election was not held” and that the “election issue was kept alive because it had great propaganda value” in terms of presenting the DRV on the side of legality and as an injured party.<sup>14</sup> At the very least, if reunification could not be achieved through elections in 1956, the intervening years would give the DRV time to regroup and rebuild economically.

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<sup>13</sup> Ang Chen Guan, *Vietnamese Communists’ Relations with China and the Second Indochina Conflict* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, 1997), 12.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

While Cold War realities, the threat of American intervention, and intense Chinese and Soviet pressure all contributed significantly to the DRV's decision to compromise, little attention has been paid to the equally important domestic reasons. Many of these domestic reasons stem from the devastating effects of French colonialism on Vietnam, particularly on the countryside, where close to 90% of the population lived. Decades of land expropriations and direct concessions to French colonists and Vietnamese "collaborators" led to land being concentrated in the hands of large, wealthy landlords.<sup>15</sup> Owning little or no land, Vietnamese peasants became entrenched in a cycle of debt, unable to break free from usury interest rates, exorbitant land rents, and suffocating taxes imposed by landlords who doubled as village elites.

For the Vietnamese Communists, land reform was the short-term solution to problems of landlessness and extreme rural poverty. It involved, in the words of Chinese and Vietnamese land reform historian Edwin Moise, "much more than taking land from the landlords and giving it to the poor; it was directed against all the sources from which the old rural elite drew its power."<sup>16</sup> Land reform was an agrarian revolution aimed at both the destruction of the traditional landlord-gentry elite and the creation of a "new group of rural leaders who would ally themselves with revolutionary leaders at the national level as well as with the peasant masses from among whom they had come."<sup>17</sup> Since the power of traditional rural elites came from owning large amounts of land, the division and redistribution of it to peasants was central to the process of rural

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<sup>15</sup> For a detailed analysis of French colonial land policies, see Ngo Vinh Long, *Before the Revolution: Vietnamese Peasants under the French* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973; reprint 1991), Christine White, "Agrarian Reform and National Liberation in the Vietnamese Revolution, 1920-1957" (Ph.D. diss., University of Cornell, 1981), and Pham Cao Duong, *Vietnamese Peasants Under French Domination, 1861-1945* (Berkeley, California: University Press of America, 1985).

<sup>16</sup> Edwin Moise, *Land Reform in China and North Vietnam: Consolidating the Revolution at the Village Level* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 4.



transformation. The process of giving “land to the tillers” would do more than just satisfy peasant demands for land, release the forces of production, and bring the majority population to power in the countryside. It would also lay the important groundwork for the transition to socialism and the future collectivization of agriculture – the ultimate solution to increasing production and improving the standard of living in the countryside.

The Vietnamese Communists took a number of different approaches to agrarian reform between 1930 and 1954. Specific policies regarding land reform during those years shifted with changing international and domestic conditions. From the founding of the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) in 1930 to the formation of a popular front government in France in 1936, the Communist leadership implemented a radical land reform that confiscated all lands belonging to foreign and native landlords, regardless of their stance toward the national revolution. During this period, reflecting the stance of the Soviet Union and Joseph Stalin’s analysis of Chiang Kai-shek’s betrayal of the Chinese Communists, the ICP emphasized the centrality of class struggle over nationalism in post-World War I society. At the same time, brutal living conditions in the countryside and peasant unrest in Nghe-an and Ha-tinh provinces served to push the Party’s agrarian policies in a more radical direction.

The rumblings of World War II, however, changed the overarching context for agrarian reform in Vietnam and led to the moderation of land policies. Following the guidance of the Seventh Comintern Congress and Stalin’s new analysis that the primary threat to the international working class headed by the Soviet Union was fascism rather than imperialism, the ICP stopped its policy of confiscating French and native landlord

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

lands to form alliances with all progressive, anti-fascist forces in 1936.<sup>18</sup> After the formation of a French popular front government that included that nation's Communist Party in 1936, the Party mobilized peasants to demand reforms within the colonial system. Hitler's stunning defeat of France and the subsequent collaboration of the new Vichy puppet government with Japan, though, forced the Party to re-evaluate its revolutionary framework and land policies.<sup>19</sup>

Looking increasingly to the experiences of the Chinese Communists in its War of Resistance to Japan, the Vietnamese Communists found an overarching framework for the Revolution in Mao's concept of "new democracy." The founding of the Vietminh in 1941 crystallized the Party's commitment to "new democracy" and the establishment of a broad united front of all progressive, anti-imperialist forces. During World War II, the ICP, acting under the auspices of the Vietminh, carried out a policy of confiscating only those lands belonging to French landlords and native "collaborators" in order to promote the united front and form the strongest resistance possible to Japanese and French imperialism. Moderate land policies, for a number of international and domestic reasons, would continue even after the Vietminh's seizure of power during the August Revolution in 1945. The presence of hostile Allied powers in the North and South, combined with the serious threat of countrywide famine, limited the Party's ability to address the

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<sup>18</sup> Rejecting the Second International's support of World War I and betrayal of socialism, Lenin and the Soviet leadership created the Comintern, also known as the Third International, in 1919 to aid and give leadership to the international proletarian revolution. Ho Chi Minh began his involvement with the Comintern in 1923, when he worked at its headquarters in Moscow and attended a training institute for Third World revolutionaries. Joseph Stalin took over leadership of the Comintern in 1928 after his purge of Nikolai Bukharin. William Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam*, 2d ed. (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1996), 16-17.

<sup>19</sup> The Vichy government was the Nazi puppet government installed in France after Germany's successful invasion in 1940. In August 1940, the Vichy government reached an agreement with Japan, by which the "Japanese formally recognized French sovereignty in Indochina in return for military facilities and transit rights through Indochina and the right to station troops in Tonkin. Duiker, *Communist Road to Power*, 62-63.

agrarian question. Likewise, the return of the French and their attempt to win a “lightning war” in 1946-1947 made agrarian reform less than a top priority for Party leaders struggling for mere survival. From 1941 to 1951, the Party repeatedly emphasized the necessity of maintaining the broad national united front and subordinating the anti-feudal task to the interests of national liberation.

While moderate policies of rent reduction and confiscation of “traitor” lands characterized, for the most part, the years of the national united front against French and Japanese imperialism, more radical policies emerged after the establishment of the Bao Dai regime in the South and the increasing intervention of the United States in the early 1950s. In short, a new domestic competitor was sharpening class divisions in the countryside and a new foreign threat was aiding the French militarily and monetarily to lengthen the Resistance War; under these circumstances, the need and pressure for a more radical land reform grew after the Second Congress of the Party in 1951. At the same time, the Party felt obliged to pursue a more radical land reform to compensate the poor and landless peasants, who were the most enthusiastic participants both in the Revolution and in the people’s armed forces. There was a sense among Party leaders that peasants deserved land after their enormous sacrifices and sufferings during the protracted conflicts.

Having neglected and placed promises of “land to the tiller” on the back burner for thirteen years, the Party finally implemented a more comprehensive land reform to meet the needs of the Revolution in late 1953. These needs included mobilizing peasants for the Resistance War and support of the Party, satisfying peasant demands for land in compensation for their many sacrifices during the wars with France and Japan, purifying

the Party's ranks of landlords and rich peasants, winning the long-term support of the peasantry, and undermining the new Bao Dai regime in Saigon. In undertaking a radical land reform in 1953, the Party was gambling that the benefits of land reform, particularly the mobilization of poor and landless peasants, would outweigh the costs of breaking unity in the national united front. Land reform was instrumental in the future success of the Vietnamese Revolution in the minds of the Party leadership, particularly facing the prospect of a protracted war with the United States, and it needed relatively peaceful and stable conditions to undertake and consolidate the program.

By late 1953 and early 1954, VWP leaders were calling for the Resistance War to be "sped up" in order to ensure the "success of land reform." Speeding up the Resistance War meant applying more pressure against France on the military front in the hopes of bringing about a negotiated settlement, which Ho Chi Minh deemed essential for avoiding a direct United States military intervention. Vo Nguyen Giap, commander of the Vietminh forces, indicated in an appeal on the beginning of the Dienbienphu campaign, that the battle would make a "worthy contribution to the world peace movement."<sup>20</sup> He also indicated that the battle, the purpose of which was to bring about a negotiated settlement, would help to "ensure the success of land reform." Ho Chi Minh also told the Party in a major speech in December 1953 that it had to "speed up the Resistance War in order to ensure the success of land reform."<sup>21</sup> A political settlement to the war was important not only because it would temporarily prevent a direct U.S.

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<sup>20</sup> "Appeal by Giap to All Cadres and Fighters, Units, and Services, on Beginning the Dienbienphu Campaign, March 1954," in Gareth Porter, ed., *Vietnam: A History in Documents* (New York: Earl M. Coleman Enterprises, Inc., 1979), 131.

<sup>21</sup> Ho Chi Minh, "Report to the National Assembly of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam," December 1953 in Bernard Fall, ed., *Ho Chi Minh On Revolution: Selected Writings, 1920-1966* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1967), 258.

military intervention but also because it would allow the Party to undertake a land reform projected to mobilize millions of peasants for a future protracted war with the United States. The Communist leadership knew that land reform would mobilize the peasantry because of the land reform experiences of the Chinese Communist Party in its successful bid for power after World War II, a fact noted by Ho Chi Minh in his speech announcing the radical land reform in 1953. After the Korean armistice, the United States showed more overt signs of directly intervening in Vietnam through its huge financial and military contributions to the French. American politicians also made comments indicating a future American intervention.

The only way that the Vietnamese Communists could temporarily prevent a direct American military intervention while implementing the crucial land reform needed for a future protracted war with the U.S. was to compromise and reach a political settlement at Geneva. Truong Chinh, party theoretician and chief architect of the land reform, indicated that the Party needed relatively stable and peaceful conditions to carry out the radical land reform policy. A political settlement at Geneva would have provided the very conditions necessary for the successful implementation of the land reform considered so vital to the ultimate, long-term success of the Revolution.

To grasp the centrality of land reform, we must begin with an overview of the history of the Vietnamese Communists' approaches to rural transformation. Among the issues to explore are the various agrarian policies undertaken by the Vietnamese Communists between 1930 and 1954 as well as the overarching contexts for those policies.

## Founding of the Indochinese Communist Party and the Nghe-Tinh Rural Revolt

In February 1930, under guidance from the Soviet Union and Joseph Stalin, the three competing Communist parties of Vietnam merged under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh to form a revolutionary political party of the working class devoted to the twin tasks of anti-imperialism and anti-feudalism. Upon the merger, Ho laid out the main slogans of the new party, which included the establishment of a “worker-peasant and soldier government,” the confiscation of “banks and other enterprises belonging to imperialists,” and, in terms of agrarian reform, the confiscation of “plantations and property belonging to the imperialists and the Vietnamese reactionary capitalist class.”<sup>22</sup> Such lands confiscated from imperialists and “reactionary” Vietnamese capitalists would then be distributed to poor peasants. In a strategy document approved at the unity conference, Ho stressed the need to form a broad coalition and to reach out to nationalist groups, intellectuals, patriotic rich peasants and landlords, and the petty bourgeoisie. As William Duiker noted perceptibly in, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam*, Ho Chi Minh “reiterated his conviction of the importance of national independence to the cause of the Vietnamese Revolution” by naming the new Party, the Vietnam Communist Party.<sup>23</sup> In only eight short months, though, facing criticism from Moscow, the Party would change its name to the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) to better reflect

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<sup>22</sup> Ho Chi Minh, “Appeal Made on the Occasion of the Founding of the Indochinese Communist Party,” in *Ho Chi Minh Selected Writings 1920-1969* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1977), 41. Both William Duiker, in the *Communist Road to Power in Vietnam* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1996) and James Pinckney Harrison in *The Endless War: Fifty Years of Struggle in Vietnam* (New York: The Free Press, 1982), indicated that the Party’s name change occurred at the First Plenum of the Party’s Central Committee in October 1930. Since Ho’s appeal was written in February 1930, the Party should be called the Vietnam Communist Party. Yet, in all translations of this piece I encountered, the words “Indochinese Communist Party” appear in the title. I am not sure of the origin of this discrepancy.

proletarian internationalism and the centrality of class struggle over nationalism in the post-World War I world.

Ho Chi Minh's program for the Vietnam Communist Party was at odds in many ways with the official Comintern line that had propagated in 1928. The Sixth Comintern Congress held that year had called on Communist parties in colonial countries to reject alliances with the bourgeoisie and to increase working class membership. The decisions reflected Stalin's increasingly radical bent in Soviet domestic affairs and his analysis of the bloody betrayal of the Communists by Chiang Kai-shek and his Nationalist Party in 1927, a betrayal that wrecked the carefully constructed united front in China. The formation of the Indochinese Communist Party in October 1930 under the leadership of Tran Phu, who had been trained in Moscow at the Communist University of the Peoples of the East, and its subsequent program, the "October Theses," repudiated much of Ho Chi Minh's work in February and signaled a move away from his more nationalistic, united front approach to the revolution. The "October Theses" argued that "the struggle of the worker-peasant masses has taken on a very clearly independent character and is no longer influenced by nationalism as it used to be."

In terms of agrarian policy, the document called for the Party to

confiscate all lands belonging to foreign and native landlords and to religious organizations, and hand them over to middle and poor peasants, the right of ownership being in the hands of the worker-peasant government.<sup>24</sup>

The confiscation of all lands belonging to landlords, regardless of their stance toward the national revolution, represented a major shift from Ho Chi Minh's agrarian policies in

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<sup>23</sup> Duiker, *Communist Road to Power*, 33.

<sup>24</sup> Christine White, "Agrarian Reform and National Liberation in the Vietnamese Revolution, 1920-1957" (Ph.D. diss., University of Cornell, 1981), 54.

February. During the founding of the Vietnam Communist Party in February 1930, Ho suggested that only property belonging to imperialists and reactionary Vietnamese capitalists should be confiscated, hinting at the toleration of landlords and other exploiting native elements if they supported the cause of national liberation.

Comintern policy contributed to the ICP's rejection of Ho Chi Minh's more modest agrarian policies and efforts at forming a broad national united front against imperialism and feudalism. It was particularly difficult to sustain Ho's argument for a united front and for collaboration with "bourgeois" nationalist elements when these very forces had turned on the Communists in China only three years earlier. Moreover, there were also strong domestic forces pushing the ICP toward a more radical land reform line in late 1930. Between February and October 1930 "there had been a wave of strikes and peasant demonstrations which had culminated in the collapse of colonial control and the establishment of peasant self-government in several villages in Nghe-an province in September."<sup>25</sup> The "October Party Program," according to Christine White, was

in part a reflection of the situation in the country at the time, when peasants who had never heard the terms 'class struggle,' the 'Communist International,' 'class against class', and 'soviets,' overthrew the councils of notables and chose people among themselves to act as the new village government.<sup>26</sup>

The early upsurge, in part "launched, and continually supported by Communist Party activities," outstripped the Party's initial objectives and expectations.<sup>27</sup>

The peasant movement targeted both oppressive local landlords and Vietnamese representatives of the French government, thereby assuming both an anti-imperialist and

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.



anti-feudal character. Peasant soviets called for the “seizure of communal land confiscated earlier by wealthy families, the annulment of local taxes, the lowering of rents, and the distribution of excess rice to the needy.”<sup>28</sup> The issue of rice was particularly meaningful for the peasants in Nghe-an and Ha-tinh provinces because the years 1930-1931 were famine years. Excess rice was taken from rich and even middle peasants to feed the starving. While the redistribution of land was generally restricted to the aforementioned communal lands that had been confiscated in earlier years by wealthy families, in some areas famine-stricken peasants “seized the lands of wealthy landowners on their own initiative;” a few even set up cooperatives.<sup>29</sup>

Peasants in Nghe-an and Ha-tinh were responding actively to depressed rural conditions and real hardship, whether spontaneously in some cases or at the behest of Communist officials in others. Statistics on landlessness and landownership in the 1930s offer a devastating general picture of the harsh conditions faced by Vietnamese peasants. In Annam, where Nghe-an and Ha-tinh provinces are located, roughly 53% of families were completely landless according to a 1952-1953 study by the French government for the year 1938.<sup>30</sup> In Tonkin and Cochinchina, roughly 58% and 79% of families respectively were completely without land.<sup>31</sup>

Of the persons actually owning land, according to Pierre Gourou’s estimates for Tonkin in 1939, 61% (586,000) of all landowners owned less than one *mau*<sup>32</sup>; 30% (283,000) owned from one to five, 6% (60,000) owned from five to ten, 2% (20,000)

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<sup>28</sup> Duiker, *Communist Road to Power*, 38.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>30</sup> Ngo Vinh Long, *Before the Revolution: Vietnamese Peasants under the French* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973; reprint 1991), 19.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 27, 29.

<sup>32</sup> A *mau* of land was equal to 3,600 square meters (roughly 9/10 of an acre). One hectare was approximately equal to 2.77 *mau*.

owned from ten to fifty, .0008% (800) owned from fifty to one hundred, and .0002% (250) owned more than one hundred *mau*.<sup>33</sup> From these figures, 91% of the population owned less than five *mau* while occupying only 37% of the cultivated surface. These numbers are remarkable in light of Ngo Vinh Long's calculations that a landowner with a family of four would need at least three *mau* (1.08 hectares) in order to produce enough food to feed his family.<sup>34</sup> If an overwhelming majority of families that actually owned land were close to starvation in the 1930s, particularly the famine years of 1930-1931, imagine what the conditions were like for landless peasants!

The above figures also indicated an extreme concentration of wealth in the hands of Vietnamese and French landlords. Working from Gourou's statistics, Ngo Vinh Long claimed that a more accurate estimation of the land occupied by large landowners (more than 50 *mau*), who made up less than 0.1% of the total landowning population in Tonkin, would be close to 17% of the total cultivated surface. The remaining 19% of cultivated surface was considered communal land.<sup>35</sup> Similar patterns of concentrated landholdings and poverty existed in Annam and to an even greater extent in Cochin China.<sup>36</sup> It must be noted that Gourou's figures, as many historians have noticed, likely *underestimated* the amount of land owned by landlords and should be treated as rough estimates for

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>36</sup> Long provided the following statistics on landownership in Annam. Small landowners (94% of the total number of landholders) owning less than five *mau* worked on 37% of the cultivated land area. Large landowners (considerably less than 0.1% of the population) owning more than 100 *mau* owned 17% of the cultivated land area. In Cochinchina, where French domination was the strongest, 80% of all landowners owned less than five hectares each, a majority in that category owning close to nothing. These small landowners occupied only 12% of the total cultivated surface. Large landowners (owning more than fifty hectares) made up 2.5% of the population and occupied 45% of the land. It is important to remember that out of a rural population of 4,000,000 million in Cochinchina, there were only 255,000 landowners. While Long's statistics, which come from a combination of Henry's and Gourou's, are at most a rough estimate, they do illustrate the extreme concentration of wealth in the hands of Vietnamese and French landlords in the countryside. See Long, *Before the Revolution*, 27-29.

landownership in the 1930s. Nonetheless, they do present a general, stark portrait of landownership under the French and give credibility to communist claims that a thorough land reform and “land to the tiller” program was needed to improve the quality of peasant life in the countryside.

Statistics on landownership, however, only tell half of the harsh and brutal story of Vietnamese peasants. In addition to subsistence, which was no easy matter as the statistics above indicate, peasants also had to pay high land rents, exorbitant interest rates, and a variety of burdensome taxes to support local elites and the colonial regime. Truong Chinh and Vo Nguyen Giap outlined many of these problems in their piece on rural conditions, *The Peasant Question, 1937-1938*. Since most Vietnamese peasants did not own enough land to support their families, they had to rent out land from landlords and rich peasants. Truong and Giap indicated the widespread existence of two forms of rent exploitation, land rent and labor rent. In Tonkin and Annam, landlords charged tenants 50% of the crop for rent in kind. In other areas, tenants received a small plot of land in exchange for farming the landlords’ land. Tenants paying rent with labor would also have to work as servants in the landlord’s house, facing repeated insults and physical abuse.<sup>37</sup> In addition to the main forms of rent exploitation, peasants also had to deal with a variety of supplementary rents. Peasants had to pay fees to landlords when they started farming and when they reported the harvest. In some regions, anytime a landlord celebrated the anniversary of a family death, peasants would be forced to pay a fee or

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<sup>37</sup> Truong Chinh and Vo Nguyen Giap, *The Peasant Question, 1937-1938* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University 1974), 32-35 for narrative on rent exploitation. Information on rent exploitation taken from those pages.

provide a certain amount of rice. During festival days, peasants had to work without pay at the landlord's house and in the fields.<sup>38</sup>

As Truong and Giap indicated in their report, after the peasant paid all the various rents and fees, he usually had to borrow money in order to feed and support his family, especially during "hungry" periods. Ngo Vinh Long stated that since most peasants did not have anything to mortgage or offer as security, they usually took out short-term loans at extremely high rates of interest. Long provided the following description of the two methods of granting short term loans:

According to the first, which is called *bac gop* ("money collected daily"), a loan of 10 piasters is reimbursed by a daily installment of 0.40 piasters over 30 days. At the end of this period, the lender has gained 2 piasters, that is, disregarding calculation of compound interest, an interest rate of 240 percent a year. By the second method, which is called *vay bac ngay* or *vay cat co* ("daily loans" or "cut-throat loans"), a piaster borrowed in the morning is paid back the same afternoon with a supplement of 0.10 piaster: the annual interest is thus 3,650 percent.<sup>39</sup>

Peasants able to take out long-term loans experienced incredibly high interest rates as well. In Tonkin and Annam, loans taken out over several months ranged from 30-50 percent per rice season, or 60 to 100 percent a year.<sup>40</sup> Peasants, forced to borrow money because of rent exploitation, found themselves in a repressive cycle of usurious loans and unending debt.

To make matters worse, peasants also had to pay a variety of direct and indirect taxes, the most infamous being the head tax. The head tax was a fee that everyone between 18 and 60 years of age had to pay, 2.25 piasters per person in Tonkin and 3 piasters in Annam. Many peasants had to borrow money from landlords to pay this tax.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Long, *Before the Revolution*, 85.

It is important to remember too that peasants had to pay all production costs, even as a tenant, including the cost of putting fertilizer in the land. Forced government monopolies of salt, alcohol, and tobacco also burdened peasants. In many areas, government officials forced village leaders to buy a certain amount of alcohol, with possible forced-labor sentences and beatings the result of non-compliance.<sup>41</sup>

Peasant unrest in the early 1930s, whether spontaneous or instigated by Communist officials, stemmed from the brutally harsh conditions in the countryside. Not only did peasants own virtually no land, but they also faced a number of additional burdens such as rent exploitation and usury that led to a cycle of poverty and rural indebtedness. All these factors combined to fuel the peasant rebellions of 1930 and the radical land policies pursued by the ICP.

In the end, however, the French mercilessly crushed the 1930 uprising—with dire consequences for the ICP. The Party suffered enormous casualties, with total losses to the Party estimated at 2,000 dead and 51,000 arrested. Perhaps more importantly for the newly formed organization, the French decapitated the Party's leadership – up to 90% of the Party cadres ended up in prison or before a firing squad, according to Communist sources.<sup>42</sup> For those who remained, a number of valuable lessons were to be learned.

Duiker summed up the lessons nicely:

To transform a rural rebellion into a serious threat to colonial rule would require an experienced revolutionary Party, disciplined, sure-handed, and able to tread the thin line behind excessive caution and adventurism. It would require organization and painstaking preparation in order to build a broad base of support throughout the countryside. And it would require a

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Truong and Giap, *Peasant Question*, 36-43 describes usury in the countryside at length.

<sup>42</sup> Duiker, *Communist Road to Power*, 42-43.

firm base among anticolonial elements in the cities. In a word, it would require a full understanding of the protracted character of revolt in Asia.<sup>43</sup>

For an understanding of the “protracted character of revolt in Asia,” the Vietnamese Communists would look increasingly toward Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communists in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Before they could take the time to look for a revolutionary model; however, they had to rebuild an utterly devastated Communist Party.

### **Rebuilding the Party: The Democratic Front**

The task of rebuilding the Party after the repression of the Nghe-Tinh revolt received a major boost when the Seventh Comintern Congress called on Communist parties around the world to unite and form popular fronts with non-communist parties against the threat of fascism in July 1935. The rise of Hitler in Germany and militarism in Japan had, according to the new analysis, changed the principal enemy of the working class from imperialism to fascism; hence, the working class should unite with all progressive forces, including the bourgeoisie, to combat the common threat. Formation of a French popular front government in 1936 that included that nation’s Communist party allowed the ICP to act and organize openly to an extent previously unseen, providing rare opportunities for Communist organizing in a colonized country.<sup>44</sup> The release of hundreds of Vietnamese Communist political prisoners, many of whom had been arrested during the Nghe-Tinh revolt, also aided the organizing efforts of the ICP.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>44</sup> White, “Agrarian Reform,” 78-79.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 80.

Responding to the change in international conditions, the ICP Central Committee decided in July 1936 to adopt new policies that differed significantly from the “October Theses.” Temporarily dropping demands of independence and distribution of “land to the tillers,” the Party advocated

the founding of the broad “Anti-Imperialist People’s Front,” “embracing all classes, political parties, and religious organizations, and nationalities in Indochina, in order to struggle together for elementary democratic rights: freedom of association, of organization, of speech, of publication, of movement, and of travel abroad, general amnesty for political prisoners, eight-hour work day, labour law for workers....<sup>46</sup>

While class struggle was not to be forgotten completely, Ho Chi Minh made it perfectly clear in his report to the Comintern in July 1939 that working with the popular front government in France and forming a broad coalition of forces against fascism and Japanese imperialism was the Party’s number one priority. He stated, “For the time being, the Party should not put forth too exacting demands (national independence, parliament, ect.). To do so is to play the Japanese fascists’ hands. It should only claim democratic rights ....”<sup>47</sup> The temporary dropping of national independence and the anti-feudal task from the program of the revolution led to changes in agrarian policy. The Party would have had a hard time convincing the French popular front government and native anti-fascist elements of its sincere commitment to a broad united front if it were confiscating French and native landlord possessions at the same time. Instead, the ICP organized and encouraged peasants to demand reforms within the colonial system, such as reductions in taxes. As Christine White noted, “Legal forms of peasant organization

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<sup>46</sup> *Thirty Years of Struggle of the Party* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1960), (underlining in text), 50-51. Quotation from document “Around the Indochinese Communist Party’s New policy” published on October 30, 1936, seen in White, “Agrarian Reform,” 79.

<sup>47</sup> Ho Chi Minh, “The Party’s Line in the Period of the Democratic Front (1936-1939) in *Selected Writings 1920-1969* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1977), 42.

were developed, experience which was useful when the Party was forced underground again in 1939.”<sup>48</sup>

Between 1936 and 1939, the Party was able to extend its influence to urban workers and intellectuals, as well as rebuild rural party branches that had been destroyed in 1931. By early 1939, the Party had more than 2,000 members and 40,000 followers.<sup>49</sup> According to William Duiker, when compared to its rivals, the ICP’s “performance was even more impressive.” The Vietnamese Nationalist Party (VNQDD) and Constitutionalist Party failed to develop significant followings; the VNQDD was relatively inactive and the Constitutionalist Party were in a state of near disintegration. The result, as Duiker stated in the *Communist Road to Power*, was that by end of the 1930s, “the ICP was virtually alone in carrying the banner of Vietnamese nationalism.”<sup>50</sup>

French politics moved increasingly to the right after the collapse of the Popular Front in 1938 and the creation of the puppet government for the Nazis at Vichy after Hitler’s successful invasion, ending the era of relatively open activity for the ICP. Outlawed and harshly repressed once again, the ICP leadership convened the Sixth Session of the Central Committee in November 1939 to re-evaluate Party policy in light of the changing international and domestic conditions and France’s tightening grip over its colonial possessions. It stated,

The present situation is dominated by the imperialist war, the economic crisis, the fascist and colonialist domination, which have caused the national question to be one of primary urgency and importance. Most of the small and middle bourgeoisie of the country also hate the imperialists. On the platform of national liberation and in the supreme interest of the

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<sup>48</sup> White, “Agrarian Reform,” 80.

<sup>49</sup> Duiker, *Communist Road to Power*, 57.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 57-58.



nation, all revolutionary tasks, including the agrarian question, must be made dependent on that aim.<sup>51</sup>

In resolutions that would be more fully worked out in the Eight Plenum after the Japanese invasion in 1940, the Party reaffirmed its commitment to the twin tasks of the revolution – the anti-imperialist and the anti-feudal – with the national revolution taking priority over the agrarian. In calling for the formation of a united front of all anticolonial elements against the French, the subordination of the agrarian question to the needs of the broad national front, and preparations for armed insurrection, the Sixth Plenum laid out sketches of the Party's foundation of resistance for the next thirteen years and its organizational expression: the Vietminh.

### **The New Democratic Framework**

In order to place the founding of the Vietminh and early agrarian policies during the national united front in proper context, it is important to discuss some aspects of the relationship between the Chinese and Indochinese Communist leadership.<sup>52</sup> The intent in highlighting Chinese influences is not to imply or even enter the debate over whether Ho Chi Minh and the Vietnamese Communist leadership copied the Chinese revolutionary model; rather, the intent is to show that the Party was looking to study the larger CCP framework for revolution in colonial and semi-colonial countries for applicability and practicality in Vietnam.

Many ICP leaders, most notably Ho Chi Minh, had significant relationships and dealings in China and with the CCP. Ho, after spending nearly half a decade in Moscow,

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<sup>51</sup> Tran Phuong, "The Land Reform," *Vietnamese Studies* 7 (1965): 169.

left the Soviet Union in 1938 to join the CCP in Yen-an, though he only spent a few weeks in the famous CCP headquarters.<sup>53</sup> Traveling with Ye Jianying, later the Secretary of Defense and Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress in Beijing, Ho went to Chunking where he, according to King Chen in *Vietnam and China, 1938-1954*, "frequently visited Chou En-lai." Ho later went on to serve as "the club manager of a liaison office of the Eighth Route Army in Kweilin and concurrently as a radio operator."<sup>54</sup> From Kweilin, Ho continued his travels south to Kunming, capital of Yunnan Province and a refuge for Vietnamese revolutionaries fleeing the intense French persecution after 1939. "With the area now in a highly fluid state as a result of the Japanese invasion along the southern Chinese coast," according to Duiker, "the southern provinces of Yunnan and Guangxi presented a relatively secure haven for Vietnamese nationalists and a potential base for political activities in Vietnam."<sup>55</sup> It was in Kunming that Ho met up with his future comrade-in-arms Pham Van Dong and Vo Nguyen Giap, who had been sent by the ICP Central Committee to China to find him.<sup>56</sup>

Interestingly, upon their arrival in Kunming, Ho Chi Minh sent Dong and Giap to the Institute of Marxism-Leninism in Yen-an to "solidify links with the CCP and to strengthen his colleagues' understanding of the Maoist concept of people's war."<sup>57</sup> For Pham Van Dong, the future representative of the DRV delegation at Geneva, the trip to China was not his first; he had gone to South China in the 1920s to join Ho's

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<sup>52</sup> Two books in particular chronicle the relationship between the Vietnamese and Chinese Communists, King Chen's, *Vietnam and China 1938-1954* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969) and Qiang Zhai's, *China and the Vietnam Wars 1950-1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

<sup>53</sup> Not much is known about Ho's activities during his stay in Yen-an. While Ho did mention his experiences in the Eighth Route Army in his piece, "The Chinese Revolution and the Vietnamese Revolution," July 1, 1961) *Selected Writings*, he did not mention anything about Yen-an.

<sup>54</sup> King Chen, *Vietnam and China: 1938-1954* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 43.

<sup>55</sup> Duiker, *Communist Road to Power*, 69.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 69. Incident also referenced by King Chen, *Vietnam and China*, 40-41.

Revolutionary Youth League and study at the famous Whampoa Military Academy. While Dong and Giap never made it to Yen-an (Ho cancelled the trip two weeks later, after the Germans conquered Paris), Ho's decision to send the two leaders reflected a shift in strategic orientation away from Moscow to the experiences of the CCP in the War of Resistance to Japan. Yet, the move also seemed to suggest a deeper understanding that the basic tenets of the CCP program for revolution in colonial and semi-colonial countries could be applied to Vietnam, providing the necessary meta-framework for the revolution. This understanding could be seen prominently in the ICP's founding of the Vietminh Front in May 1941.

The Eighth Plenum of the ICP, which met in May 1941, formalized the new Party strategy promulgated by the Central Committee in November 1939. With the invasion of the Japanese in September 1940, the Vietnamese people faced an additional imperialist enemy. The Eighth Plenum witnessed the official creation of a broad national united front – known as the Vietminh – of all patriotic elements, including landlords and members of the bourgeoisie, under the leadership of the proletariat for national liberation from the “double yoke” of French and Japanese imperialism. Appealing to the nationalistic impulses of all social strata in a June 6 public letter entitled, “The Founding of the Vietminh,” Ho Chi Minh proclaimed, “Rich people, soldiers, workers, peasants, intellectuals, employees, traders, youth, and women who warmly love your country! At present time national liberation is the most important problem. Let us unite together!”<sup>58</sup>

The establishment of a national united front against imperialism was a major part of the new-democratic framework. Mao's January 1940 treatise, “On New Democracy,”

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid. King Chen cited a similar a similar event in, *Vietnam and China*, 41.

written just one year before the founding of the Vietminh, laid out the theory and reasons for a national united front within the two-stage revolution in semi-colonial and colonial countries. He stated,

Since China is a colony as well as a semi-colony encroached upon by others, her national bourgeoisie has at certain periods and to a certain degree a revolutionary quality. Here the task of the proletariat is to attach due importance to the revolutionary quality of the national bourgeoisie and establish with it a united front against imperialism and the governments of bureaucrats and warlords.<sup>59</sup>

Yet, at the same time, Mao warned of the tenuous nature of alliances with the national bourgeoisie and landlord class:

But at the same time, just because the Chinese national bourgeoisie is a bourgeois class in a colony and semi-colony, it is extremely flabby politically and economically and possesses another character, namely a proneness to compromise with the enemy of the revolution. Even when it takes part in a revolution, it is unwilling to break completely with imperialism and is moreover closely related to exploitation by land rent in rural areas; thus it is neither willing nor able to overthrow imperialism thoroughly, much less the feudal forces. So neither of the two basic problems, or the two basic tasks, of China's bourgeois-democratic revolution can be solved or accomplished by the Chinese national bourgeoisie.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ho Chi Minh, "Founding of the Doc-Lap Dong Minh Hoi (Vietminh)," in *Vietnam and America*, Gettleman et al., ed., 23-24.

<sup>59</sup> Mao Zedong, "On New Democracy," vol. 3, *Selected Works* (New York: International Publishers, 1954), 117. The national bourgeoisie, for Mao, represented the middle bourgeoisie and the capitalist relations of production. Unlike the comprador class, which depended on imperialism and foreign capital for its livelihood, the national bourgeoisie, in the words of Mao,

feel[s] the need for revolution and favour[s] the revolutionary movement against imperialism and the warlords when they are smarting under the blows of foreign capital and the oppression of the warlords, but they become suspicious of the revolution when they sense that, with the militant participation of the proletariat at home and the active support of the international proletariat abroad, the revolution is threatening the hope of their class to attain the status of a big bourgeoisie.

Mao Zedong, "Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society," in *Selected Works*, vol. 1 (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1975), 14.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

With the bourgeoisie unable to complete and provide leadership to the bourgeois-democratic revolution because of divisions wrought by imperialism, the leadership of the revolution would fall to the proletariat and its political organ, the Communist Party.

Imperialism placed an additional burden on workers and peasants already suffering under the yoke of feudal oppression, causing the worker-peasant alliance to serve as the most enthusiastic and revolutionary force. The first stage of the revolution (bourgeois-democratic), therefore, would not result in the establishment of a capitalist society under the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, but rather the establishment of a new-democratic republic under the joint dictatorship of all revolutionary classes led by the proletariat.<sup>61</sup> With leadership of the revolution in the hands of the proletariat and with the worker-peasant alliance the driving force, “new democracy” would serve as a “transitional step toward socialism.” Mao stated,

Thus this revolution actually serves the purpose of creating a still wider path for the development of socialism... Such a revolution inevitably becomes a part of the proletarian-socialist world revolution.<sup>62</sup>

“On New Democracy” brought Mao’s political treatises on guerilla warfare, contradiction, class relationships, protracted struggle, the united front, the relationship between the Party and the people, and the relationship between political and military struggle together on a grand scale to form a usable programme for national liberation and eventual socialist revolution in colonial and semi-colonial countries. Liu Shaoqi, one of the CCP’s top leaders next to Mao, Zhu De, and Zhou Enlai, mentioned the broader applicability of “new democracy” to Southeast Asia specifically in a 1946 interview with Anna Louise Strong in Yenan. He stated that new democracy “charts a way not only for

the Chinese people but for the billion folk who live in the colonial countries of southeast Asia.”<sup>63</sup> He also stressed the applicability of “new democracy” at the Asian and Australian Trade Unions Conference in Peking in November-December 1949. Giving the keynote address, Liu stated,

The road that the Chinese people have followed in winning their victories over imperialism and its lackeys and founding the Chinese People’s Republic is the road that the peoples of many colonial and semi-colonial areas should traverse in their struggle for national independence and people’s democracy.<sup>64</sup>

Liu then laid out the four-point “formula” that brought success to the Chinese Revolution based upon the framework of “new democracy” and the CCP’s experiences in War of Resistance to Japan and the ensuing civil war with KMT. The formula included: (1) the formation of a broad national united front of anti-imperialist classes; (2) working class leadership of the united front in the form of the Communist Party; (3) a Communist Party that has a resolute understanding of Marxist-Leninist tenets, strategy and tactics, self-criticism, strict discipline, and the importance of close ties to the masses; and (4) the formation of a Communist-led national liberation army.<sup>65</sup>

Luu Duc Pho, the Vietminh’s chief delegate at the conference, replied:

In Asia, the decisive victory won by the Chinese people and the Chinese working class is, we shall say, a fatal strike to the imperialists.... In the nations in Southeast Asia, the imperialists are still planning to strengthen their military bases, their forces are still strong; the path of the 475 millions of Chinese people is the path to be taken to win a decisive victory over the imperialists.

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<sup>61</sup> Mao Zedong, “On New Democracy,” in the *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*, Vol. 2 (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1975), 347. For more detail on the politics of “new democracy,” see pages 348-353.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 343-344.

<sup>63</sup> Chen, *Vietnam and China*, 216.

<sup>64</sup> Liu Shao-Ch’i, *Collected Works of Liu Shao-ch’i 1945-1957* (Hong Kong: Union Research Institute, 1969), 178.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 178-179. Section of speech also cited in Chen, *Vietnam and China*, 217-218.

The essential principles...defined by Comrade Liu Shao-ch'i in his opening speech...must serve as the compass for all the workers of Southeast Asia.<sup>66</sup>

It must be noted that Luu Duc Pho's statement above came at a conference in China that occurred just a month after the founding of the People's Republic, and hence could have been the result of practical needs to publicly adulate the CCP in order to keep military aid flowing into Vietnam. Yet, many Vietnamese leaders explicitly mentioned the new-democratic character of the Vietnamese Revolution in contexts outside practical, military considerations. Party theoretician Truong Chinh frequently mentioned the new-democratic character of the revolution in Party theoretical writings. In his collection of *Su That* articles published to commemorate the Vietminh's later seizure of power in the August Revolution of 1945, he stated: "It is clear that the August Revolution has established a democratic republican regime with the character of a people's democracy, a new democracy in Viet Nam."<sup>67</sup> Reiterating the new-democratic orientation in his landmark piece, "The Resistance Will Win," published in 1947, two years after the August Revolution, Truong affirmed:

Though the August Revolution set up the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, this regime is not yet perfect. The present war of resistance will extend and consolidate the democratic republic regime of Viet Nam and develop it on the basis of new democracy....

This resistance carries on the work of the August Revolution. It is a revolutionary war aimed at achieving national independence, democracy, and freedom. A new Viet Nam is being forged in the fire of the resistance: an independent, unified, democratic, prosperous Viet Nam – a new democratic Viet Nam.<sup>68</sup>

Truong indicated in this piece that the Vietnamese Revolution was going to develop on

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<sup>66</sup> Chen, *Vietnam and China*, 218.

<sup>67</sup> Truong Chinh, "The August Revolution," in *Selected Writings* (Hanoi: Gioi Publishers, 1994), 48.

<sup>68</sup> Truong Chinh, "The Resistance Will Win," in *Selected Writings*, 99.

the basis of “new democracy” and the experiences of the Resistance War, just as the CCP developed along the basis of “new democracy” and the experiences of the War of Resistance to Japan. He also recognized the transitional nature of “new democracy” when he indicated that the Vietnamese Revolution must complete the task of national democratic revolution to pave the way for the “socialist revolution in the future.”<sup>69</sup> It is important to note that even Ho Chi Minh characterized the Vietnamese revolution as new-democratic, though he put a more nationalistic emphasis on it when he stated in 1949, “Chinese New Democracy is Chinese, ours is Vietnamese” in 1949.<sup>70</sup> The combination of Pho’s statement, the Vietminh’s study China campaign, Ho Chi Minh’s sending of Giap and Dong to Yenan, and Truong Chinh’s and Ho’s characterization of the Vietnamese Revolution as new-democratic all indicated that the Communist leadership looked to apply the larger CCP framework for revolution in colonial and semi-colonial countries to accomplish the revolution’s two principal tasks, the anti-imperialist and the anti-feudal.

### **Agrarian Policies Before the August Revolution**

Stemming from the new-democratic framework, the Chinese and Vietnamese Communists shared a class analysis in the early 1940s that recognized a potential revolutionary quality in the national bourgeoisie. The class analysis provided by the ICP during the Eighth Plenum, particularly the policy of differentiation between elements in the national bourgeoisie and landlord class, closely resembled Mao’s analysis of Chinese classes in the War of Resistance Against Japan. For the Vietnamese Communists, the

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<sup>69</sup> Truong Chinh, “The August Revolution,” 61.



official creation and advocacy of a national united front of all anti-colonial elements in May 1941 was the result of the Party's analysis of changing class relations resulting from the onset of World War II and the Japanese invasion of Vietnam. In a resolution issued at the close of the Eighth Plenum, the Party stated,

[T]he landlords, rich peasants, and native bourgeois class have greatly changed their attitude. Before they had an antipathy to revolution and wanted to destroy it or were indifferent. Now it is different, and with the exception of a few running dogs who flatter and fawn on the Japanese enemy, the majority have sympathy for the revolution or are neutral.... If before the landlords and native bourgeoisie were the reserve army of the antirevolutionary imperialists, they have now become the reserve of the revolution.<sup>71</sup>

Truong Chinh provided a more nuanced analysis of the landlord class in a September 1941 study document called, "The Party's New Policy:"

The feudal landowning class and the comprador bourgeois stratum are clearly divided. One landowner and comprador bourgeois embraces the French fascists; another would like to change masters, and follows the Japanese fascists. However, a few landowners, mostly small landowners, have lost faith in the French imperialists and also suspect the policy of Japan, so they have a sympathetic neutral attitude toward the revolution.<sup>72</sup>

While the two differ in their enthusiasm for potential alliances with bourgeois and landlord elements, they do share a basic analysis of the potential for a multi-class alliance against imperialism. This analysis would be the foundation from which agrarian policies during the Vietminh era would originate.

The national united front in both countries attempted to reach out to the patriotic, anti-colonial elements in the bourgeoisie and landlord class, and as a result, both nations implemented moderate agrarian policies in the interests of preserving class unity in the

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<sup>70</sup> Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh*, 416.

<sup>71</sup> Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power*, 72.

<sup>72</sup> Truong Chinh, "The Party's New Policy," in Gareth Porter, *Vietnam: The Definitive Documentation of Human Decisions* (Stanfordville, NY: Earl M. Coleman Publishers, 1979), 4.

national united front. For the CCP, Mao made this policy clear in his May 1937 piece, “The Tasks of the Chinese Communist Party in the Period of Resistance to Japan,” when he pledged to discontinue the confiscation of the land of landlords “for the sake of internal peace, democracy and armed resistance and for the sake of establishing the anti-Japanese national united front.”<sup>73</sup> For only then, Mao argued, could the Party “transform the state of antagonism between the two different regimes within the country and achieve unity for common action against the enemy, in line with the changes in the relative political importance of China’s external and internal contradictions.”<sup>74</sup> While the Vietminh did not have a formidable domestic enemy like Chiang Kai-shek and the Kuomintang during World War II, it did want to transform the state of antagonism between the wealthy propertied classes and the communist-led resistance to achieve unity against French and Japanese imperialism.

For the ICP, the Eighth Plenum marked the official pronouncement of the national united front, the subordination of the anti-feudal task to the interests of the national revolution, and the necessity of implementing moderate agrarian policies. In, “The Party’s New Policy,” Truong Chinh stated,

[I]n the present conditions of the Indochinese revolution we cannot yet confiscate the land of the native landowners and redistribute it to the peasants (except for the land belonging to the Vietnamese traitors). Because if we do that, we cannot divide the landowning class, cannot win over or at least neutralize the small landowners, especially the intellectuals, students who are children of the landowners, and we will unintentionally deprive ourselves of our support, and increase the enemy’s reserve forces.

However, the Indochinese peasants are not separate from the revolution either. We do not forget that ninety percent of the Indochinese

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<sup>73</sup> Mao Zedong, “The Tasks of the Chinese Communist Party in the Period of Resistance to Japan,” *Selected Works*, vol.1, (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1975), 269.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

people are peasants. If the peasant class does not participate in the revolution the national liberation revolution cannot succeed.<sup>75</sup>

For the Party, the balance between the interests of peasants and those of the united front led to a moderate policy of redistributing land belonging to “Japanese-French imperialists” and reducing rents and debts. The leaders of the Vietminh prescribed a policy of moderation because they believed unity with progressive landlords and bourgeois elements would provide the most effective resistance to their main enemy, French and Japanese imperialism.<sup>76</sup> The anti-feudal task, therefore, had to be subordinated to national liberation and the interests of the national united front, and the Party showed its commitment to this belief through its confiscation of lands only belonging to French and Vietnamese traitors (progressive landlords left untouched) and its policy of rent reduction. The Eighth Plenum did, however, explicitly recognize the necessity of moderate land policies *as a base* for the future land reform and implementation of the slogan “land to the tiller.”<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Truong Chinh, “The Party’s New Policy,” 5.

<sup>76</sup> The language of the sentence comes from a sentence in Thomas Lutze, “China’s New Democratic Revolution: Complexities of the ‘Anti-Feudal Struggle, 1945-1949,” *Journal of the Southwest Conference on Asian Studies* 3 (2001): 108. Referring to the CCP’s moderate land policies during the war of resistance to Japan, Lutze stated,

The anti-Japanese united front of 1937-1945...prescribed a policy of moderation toward landlords in a national struggle for survival. Hence, during the War of Resistance, the CCP carried out a policy of “double reduction” of rent and of interest, rather than land confiscation, to encourage the formation of a multi-class front against the main enemy, Japanese imperialism, and to lessen landlord resistance to mobilization of peasants for the war.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 6. Mao also explicitly mentioned the slogan of “land to the tillers,” which originated with Sun Yat-sen, in “On New Democracy.” He stated,

This republic will adopt certain necessary measures to confiscate the land of landlords and distribute it to those peasants having no land or only a little land, carry out Dr. Sun Yat-sen’s slogan of “land to the tillers,” abolish the feudal relations in the rural areas, and turn the land into the private property of peasants...The correct slogan for this line is “land to the tillers.

Mao Zedong, “On New Democracy,” 122.

The balance between the interests of peasants and the national united front, however, would not always tip in favor of the united front. Different overarching contexts for the revolution between 1951 and 1954 would lead to the implementation of a more radical land reform and the tipping of the scale in favor of peasants. Responding to increased U.S. military intervention and the rise of a domestic competitor after the Second Party Congress in 1951, the Party recognized that it was not fully mobilizing the vast resources and military potential of the peasantry for the resistance out of concerns for preserving unity. It was determined then that the benefits of land reform in terms of mobilizing and winning the long-term support of peasants would more than outweigh the costs of alienating landlords and other bourgeois elements, particularly since peasants proved to be the most enthusiastic, dependable, and staunch supporters of the revolution. It is important to recognize the overarching contexts for agrarian policies during the years of the Vietminh in order to understand the reasons why the Party would ultimately undertake a more radical land reform in 1953 and compromise at Geneva.

### **The August Revolution**

The policies, strategy, and ideology adopted by the ICP in 1941 paid off in a big way when the Viet Minh Insurrection Committee issued an order calling for the armed forces and people to attack and take over urban areas and enemy strongholds in a general insurrection on August 13, 1945.<sup>78</sup> As the historian Ngo Vinh Long noted, “Within a period of only twelve days, from 14-25 August, fifty-nine provinces were completely liberated, ending almost a century of colonial domination and hundreds of years of

monarchical rule.”<sup>79</sup> With the abdication of the emperor Bao Dai, the government was finally in the hands of the Vietnamese people and the Viet Minh.

“French and Japanese rich requisitioning and the terrible famine of 1944-45 in North Vietnam,” Christine White indicated in *Agrarian Reform and National Liberation*, “formed the context in which the Viet Minh was able to spread its influence rapidly in the lowland areas of the Tonkin delta on the basis of united front opposition to French and Japanese policies.” One of the most effective organizing tools for the Party was the “paddy seizure movement,” in which it organized peasants to storm and confiscate Japanese rice-stocks. Estimates of the number of dead in the 1944-1945 famine reach upwards of two million, or 20% of the population of Tonkin.<sup>80</sup> Historians of the revolution even note the presence of corpses lying along roadsides.<sup>81</sup> Yet, “the famine had long-range social effects since it did not affect all sectors of the population equally. While it did not spare some of the better-off inhabitants of the countryside, it was primarily the poor who died.”<sup>82</sup> The following eyewitness accounts of the famine and the contrasting experience of the rich and poor illustrate this point:

People who could buy things to eat threw the wrapping leaves, the banana peels, and the corncocks all over the walkways. The hungry would pick up the leaves and the peels to lick and chew on them...

The customers in the wine shop talked about the New Year market and about the starvation. To season their tales, they drank several cups of wine apiece to go with their ham, boiled chicken, roast pork, or hot bowls of noodle soup. As the wine went in, the words came out. They conversed in deep measured tones and laughed happily. Meanwhile, the hungry, who had risked their lives robbing food in the market, were being dragged back to this same area and were there tied up with their arms

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<sup>78</sup> Ngo Vinh Long, “Vietnam’s Revolutionary Tradition,” in *Vietnam and America*, Gettleman et al., ed., 17.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Both White, “Agrarian Reform,” 103, and Duiker, *Communist Road*, 86, cited the number of dead at approximately two million.

<sup>81</sup> Duiker, *Communist Road*, 86.

<sup>82</sup> White, “Agrarian Reform,” 104.

twisted behind them around the pillars of the shop. Now and then a customer would stand up and point a finger at them, yelling insults; “The best thing to do would be have you bums beaten to death.”

That same morning the whole market was abuzz with the news that the village council chairman’s eldest son had ordered the chief of the village patrolmen to sever the leg tendons of a certain boy named Lieu because he had dared to pick his pocket.<sup>83</sup>

Looking at the famine in light of the later land reform, White concluded that

only a scant decade later the vivid memory of such acts of cruelty and indifference to the suffering of the starving became an important factor when poor and landless peasants became the most powerful class in the countryside during the mass mobilization for land reform.... Landlords were called to answer for their acts of during the famine period, with the rural poor sitting as their judges.<sup>84</sup>

For the purposes of this study, it is important to recognize that *the Party leadership also did not forget* the devastating effects of the famine on poor and landless peasants, who were the most enthusiastic supporters of the revolution and the majority of the people’s armed forces. Under the heading, “Why Do We Have to Carry out Land Reform During the War of Resistance,” in his report about the proposed radical land reform policy to the First National Conference of the Vietnam Workers’ Party (November 1953), Truong Chinh mentioned the terrible human costs of the famine. He stated,

At the end of 1944 and early in 1945, two million of our peasants died of starvation not only due to savage exploitation by the feudal landlord class, but also because the Japanese fascists and the French imperialists brutally robbed them of their resources.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 104-105.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>85</sup> Truong Chinh, “Implementing the Land Reform,” (Report delivered at the First National Conference of the Vietnam Workers’ Party, November 14-23, 1953) in *Selected Writings*, 445.

Resolutions adopted at the National Conference of the Party from August 13-15 just prior to the general insurrection represented continuity with the policies enumerated at the Eighth Plenum and emphasized the need to carry out the “ten-point Viet Minh policy.” In terms of agrarian reform, resolutions indicated the Party’s need to “confiscate the property of the invaders and the traitors, nationalize it and distribute it to the poor according to the case;” to “abolish the iniquitous system of taxation established by the imperialists and set up an equitable and rational taxation system;” to “re-allot communal land so that the poor peasants will have land to till;” and to “reduce land rent and interest and defer payment of loans.”<sup>86</sup> Such agrarian policies were consistent with the moderation of the national united front and the multi-class effort at seizing power from the Japanese.

When the Vietminh came to power in August 1945, they immediately issued a circular for a 25% reduction in land rents,<sup>87</sup> the cancellation of all secondary rents, and the cancellation of all arrears in rent owned by tenants before August 1945, in addition to the continued policy of redistributing communal land and land owned by French and Vietnamese traitors.<sup>88</sup> Yet again, there were other overarching contexts that impacted the ability of the recently created DRV to carry out agrarian reforms, particularly the fragile situation of the new republic in the international scene and the prospect of another devastating famine. The dual entry of Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist troops in the North and of British troops south of the 16<sup>th</sup> parallel to disarm the Japanese, two forces

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<sup>86</sup> “Resolution of the National Conference of the Indochinese Communist Party,” in Gareth Porter, *Vietnam: The Definitive Documentation*, 58.

<sup>87</sup> Christine White pointed out that since rent had been about 50% of the crop, the Vietminh rent reduction brought rent down to 37.5% of the crop, the same as the KMT rent ceiling applied by the CCP during the War of Resistance to Japan. White, “Land Reform in North Vietnam,” (Agency for International Development, June 1970), 24.

extremely hostile to the possibility of Vietminh rule, provided an ominous context for the beginnings of self-government in Vietnam. “In defiance of the agreement at Potsdam to avoid intervention in the local political situation,” the British “disarmed the Vietminh and other nationalist groups and turned power over to the French, whose military units began to arrive in October.”<sup>89</sup> For the Party leadership, the very survival of the regime from hostile Allied powers was at stake after the August Revolution.

Furthermore, the threat of famine remained serious, as the 1945 harvest was half the normal tonnage. Northern Vietnam also flooded, submerging 80% of the Tonkin delta in water and destroying 300,000 tons of rice.<sup>90</sup> As a result, a major cholera epidemic ensued, then drought followed, with DRV experts predicting that food would run out by February 1946.<sup>91</sup> Increasing agricultural production to avoid another famine and human disaster was a major concern. The Party was also limited in its ability to carry out a more radical land policy because of its pure numbers; there were only 5,000 members of the ICP at the time of the August Revolution.<sup>92</sup> Agrarian revolution was not a top priority when issues of survival, both as a government and as a people, dominated the Party agenda. As the land reform historian Edwin Moise stated, though, the circular for rent reduction also “had little practical effect, because the government did not mobilize the peasants to force the landlords to obey.”<sup>93</sup> Christine White noted that the re-distribution of communal land was the most widespread reform; the Party did not stress the confiscation of French and Vietnamese traitor lands or the new rent reduction

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<sup>88</sup> Edwin Moise, *Land Reform in China and North Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 155.

<sup>89</sup> Duiker, *Vietnam: Revolution in Transition* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1995), 47.

<sup>90</sup> White, “Agrarian Reform,” 114.

<sup>91</sup> Duiker, *Communist Road*, 112.

<sup>92</sup> White, “Agrarian Reform,” 119.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*



circular. “In its infancy,” White claimed, “the DRV government concentrated on mobilizing the resources of the existing Vietnamese social system for the national cause.”<sup>94</sup>

While not enforcing rent reduction or the confiscation of “traitor” lands in the months after the August Revolution, the Party was able to stop famine conditions lingering from World War II; wipe out the hated opium, salt, and alcohol monopolies; end the head tax and some of the supplementary land taxes that were a huge burden on small landowners and tenant farmers; and drastically improve literacy in just a few years.<sup>95</sup> Despite these improvements, though, the Party did not fundamentally alter patterns of landownership in the countryside, nor did it satisfy peasant demands for land.

At this point, it is necessary to take a look at landownership in North Vietnam during the year 1945. It will provide a basis for evaluating the Party agrarian policies that followed during the war with France that lasted from 1946-1954. The statistics on landownership below for 1945 have been taken from Edwin Moise’s, *Land Reform in China and North Vietnam*, one of the most careful studies of Vietnamese land reform.

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<sup>94</sup> White, “Agrarian Reform,” 114.

<sup>95</sup> Joseph Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Political History* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1968), 233.

Table 1: The Land Tenure Situation in 1945 in the 3,653 xa of North Vietnam that underwent land reform between 1953 and 1956.<sup>96</sup>

**	Population (%)	Land Owned (%)
Colonialists		1
Churches		1.5
Landlords	3.2	24.5
Rich peasants*	* 2.2	7.1
Middle peasants	31	29
Poor Peasants and Agricultural Laborers	58.9	11.1
Communal and semipublic		25

\* The percentage for rich peasants was taken from a table on the previous page of land owned by different classes before August 1945. The number, while not 100% accurate, is probably a close figure. All figures, according to Moise, should be viewed as approximations.

\*\* Truong Chinh and Vo Nguyen Giap broadly defined rural classes in *The Peasant Question, 1937-1938*. Up until the Land Reform Law, the Party used their definitions. For the purposes of this study, it will not be important to discuss the specific definitions and revisions of class demarcation in the Land Reform Law but rather the definitions provided by Giap and Truong. They defined rural classes as follows: *landless peasants* – “peasants with no land, draft animals, or farm implements at all. Throughout the year they must work for the landlord and the rich peasant; they are mercilessly exploited and extremely poor;” *poor peasants* – “peasants with a little land, but not enough to support themselves, so they must work for wages or as tenants for rich families. Peasants in this category farm for themselves to some extent but mainly work for others;” *middle peasants* – “average peasants who have enough farmland to support themselves. They do not rent land, and, generally speaking, do not hire laborers;” *rich peasants* – “peasants with more than enough land. They and their family farm one part; the remainder, which they cannot farm themselves, is farmed by hired laborers or tenants. Thus the rich peasant exploits the labor power of agricultural laborers;” *landlords* – “They rent their land to tenants, sit idly and collect profits, and never touch a plow. They make a living entirely by exploiting the labor power of the peasants.” Truong and Giap, *The Peasant Question*, 16-17.

<sup>96</sup> Tran Phuong, ed. *Cach mang ruong dat o Viet-nam* [The Land Revolution in Vietnam] (Hanoi: Nha xuất bản khoa hoc xa hoi, 1968), 14, in Edwin Moise, *Land Reform in China and North Vietnam: Consolidating the Revolution and the Village Level* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 151.

As Moise's statistics illustrate, landownership was still extremely concentrated in 1945, with poor peasants and laborers comprising roughly 60% of the population but owning roughly 11% of the land. Landlords, while comprising only 3.2% of the population, owned some 25% of the land. Truong Chinh was right when he stated in *Su That* articles in 1946 that the August Revolution had not "abolished all the vestiges of feudalism in Viet Nam, nor realized agrarian reform and given land to the tillers."<sup>97</sup> The Party's commitment to moderation and the national united front could be seen in its reaction to demands from poor peasants for land redistribution in some parts of Vietnam just after the August Revolution. As Duiker noted, in northern Annam and in the province of Quang Ngai, "poor peasants agitated for an immediate redistribution of land." In many rural areas, the Party's moderate policies were ignored, and local cadres confiscated property and divided land. The Central Committee issued a directive in November reminding Party cadres that at this point in the Vietnamese Revolution, the anti-feudal task had to be subordinated to the interests of national liberation.<sup>98</sup>

### **Agrarian Policies during the Early Years of the War of Resistance, 1946-1951**

The renewal of the Resistance War in 1946 after the return of the French dashed any hopes for a change in policy to emphasize the agrarian question and launch an immediate "land to the tiller" campaign. The Vietnamese land reform historian Tran Phuong, while criticizing the Party for not placing enough emphasis on the agrarian question, also mentioned some of the overarching contexts for agrarian policies in 1946:

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<sup>97</sup> Truong Chinh, "The August Revolution," 47.

<sup>98</sup> Duiker, *Communist Road*, 114.

In December 1946, at the very time when the struggle of the peasants was gaining force, the nation-wide Resistance war broke out. During the first years of the war, the carrying out of the agrarian policy was somewhat neglected, for a number of reasons: the conduct of a long-term Resistance required the mobilization and concentration of all the national forces; the military situation became more pressing and more complicated; but also the anti-feudal task of the Revolution was underestimated.<sup>99</sup>

Immediate survival needs of the revolution against the intense French onslaught once again trumped the agrarian question and placed the anti-feudal task on the Party backburner. While unable to focus on the agrarian question during the DRV's fragile first months and then during the renewal of the Resistance War, the Party should have been able to place more of an emphasis on it after weathering the French "lightning war" attack on the Viet Bac stronghold in winter 1947. By 1948, the amount of territory under Vietminh control expanded significantly; approximately 55% of all villages throughout the country were under Vietminh control.<sup>100</sup>

In his 1947 tract, "The Resistance Will Win," Truong Chinh denounced cadres who believed land should be taken from all landlords and distributed to peasants.

Emphasizing the need to differentiate among feudalists in the interests of the national united front, he stated,

There are some friends who think that since our present struggle has a national and democratic character at the same time as we are fighting the colonialists, then this entails land being taken away from landlords and distributed to the tillers. We reply: this war of resistance is fulfilling the task of national liberation and is developing new democracy. At present, we shall limit ourselves to the confiscation of land and other property belonging to Vietnamese traitors in order to distribute this land to the peasants on the one hand, and swell the budget of the resistance on the other. This does not mean that we shall carry out absolutely no land reform during the course of the war of resistance. But it must be

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<sup>99</sup> Tran Phuong, "The Land Reform," 170.

<sup>100</sup> Duiker, *Communist Road*, 142.

implemented gradually and undertaken step by step, in such a way as to differentiate among the feudalists, and isolate the French colonialist aggressors.<sup>101</sup>

Integral to the step-by-step approach for land reform was rent reduction and many of the partial reforms outlined by the Party after the August Revolution. Yet such piecemeal reforms were not being carried out and implemented at the village level, even after the Vietminh began to recoup in the years 1948-1950 after the French onslaught. In an October 1948 *Su That* article, Truong Chinh listed a number of reasons why calls for rent reduction were being ignored. While the entry of the Chinese, British, and French shortly after World War II provided an overarching international context for agrarian policies in the late 1940s, Chinh focused on some of the domestic contexts for the failure to thoroughly implement the Party's rent reduction policy in the years after the August Revolution. As White has summarized the article, he indicated that "peasants did not know their rights in order to demand the decrease, and the landlords and local government committees, which included landlords, just ignored the policy." Most importantly, the situation had to be rectified with a law because peasants could not be expected to make endless sacrifices without getting anything in return – in the short-term, reductions in rent; in the long-term, land.<sup>102</sup> Truong ended with a desperate appeal to landlords to implement the Party's rent reduction policy: "Respected sirs, I beg you to remember: peasants are the greatest force in the Resistance. If they do not participate enthusiastically in the Resistance, the country will be lost."<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Truong Chinh, "The Resistance Will Win," 99.

<sup>102</sup> White, "Agrarian Reform," 126-27.

<sup>103</sup> Truong Chinh, "Giam dia to" (Reduce rents) *Su That* No. 101 (October 15, 1948), quoted in White, "Agrarian Reform," 127.

The Second Plenum of the Central Committee in January 1948 outlined the Party's agrarian policies, which were a reiteration of the policies adopted after the August Revolution. The Plenum once again called on the Party to

1. Thoroughly implement the 25 percent rent reduction (not done in many areas).
2. Abolish secondary rents....
3. Abolish the system of subletting land.
4. Temporarily allocate the land and property of traitors to the poor cultivators, or give it to military units to cultivate so they can be to some extent self-supporting.
5. Redistribute communal land more rationally and justly.
6. Allocate the land of the enemy to the poor cultivators....
11. Fix the wages of [agricultural] laborers (by the day and by the season); protect the landowners against losses.
12. The rent of estates whose owners have long been absent, or who live in enemy-occupied territory, shall temporarily be given to the provincial resistance administrative committee.... (The government promises to return these rents to the landowner whenever he returns and is judged entitled to receive these rents.)<sup>104</sup>

The fact that the same agrarian reforms kept appearing in the Party program in the years after the August Revolution and that the Party recognized its lack of implementation officially in the Second Plenum indicated the extent to which the modest policies of rent and tax reduction were being ignored at the local level.

Momentum from the Second Plenum and the Fifth Cadres' Conference in August 1948 likely led to the decision to issue a decree and formal law about rent reduction in 1949. In July, the Party issued Decree 78 of 14 July 1949, repeating the old demand that

rents should be reduced 25% below the level of 1945. “It is indicative of the caution of Vietminh agrarian policy,” Christine White stated, “that due to the priorities of production and the united front, the problem of usurious loans, as great a burden on the peasantry as rents, was not dealt with until May 1950.”<sup>105</sup>

At this point, it is important to refer to Moise’s statistics on landownership to see the empirical results of the effects of Vietminh agrarian policies between August 1945 and decree 78 for rent reduction in July 1949. While reforms and the distribution of French and Vietnamese traitor lands after the August Revolution did have a significant impact on improving peasant lives, they still did not fundamentally change the concentration of landownership and the bases of feudalism in the countryside. Table-2 shows the amounts of land transferred from various sources to peasants between 1945 and 1949.

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<sup>104</sup> Moise, *Land Reform*, 156.

<sup>105</sup> White, “Land Reform in North Vietnam,” 25.

Table-2 – Transfers of land from French, landlord, communal, and institutional ownership in 3,035 *xa*<sup>106</sup> of North Vietnam, which underwent land reform between 1953 and 1956.<sup>107</sup>

Original Ownership	August 1945 to July 1949	
	Hectares	% Transferred to Peasants
French	11,656	61
Landlords: total	25,522	10
---traitors (confiscated)	8,281	34
Catholic Church	*	*
Communal and semipublic	76,127	32
<i>Total</i>	113,306	22

\*The combined total of land transferred from the Catholic Church between 1945 and the beginning of land reform was 7,472 hectares, roughly 48%.

Thus, by 1949, the Party confiscated over 60% of French landholdings, they still maintained 39% of their original holdings from 1945, the rough equivalent of the number of hectares confiscated from native landlord traitors. Native landlords went virtually untouched during the years 1945-1949, maintaining control over roughly 90% of their landholdings from August 1945. It should be noted that of the 10% confiscated from native landlords, roughly a third of that land came from traitors or collaborators with the French.

In short, Agrarian policies from 1945-1949 did not break up concentrated landownership and the basis of feudalism in the countryside, nor did it effectively

<sup>106</sup> According to Moise, the main administrative levels below three regions of Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina were the province, the *huyen* (district, equivalent to the Chinese *xian*), and the *xa* (administrative village, equivalent to the Chinese *xiang*). Moise, *Land Reform*, 147.



mobilize the vast resources of the peasantry for the resistance and the Party. According to a later account by Truong Chinh and articles written in the Party newspaper *Su That* in 1950, landlords were able to dominate united front organizations set up at the village level, inhibiting efforts to implement the various reforms, land seizures, and calls for rent reduction.<sup>108</sup> As a result, poor peasants dragged their feet and refused to put their hearts into the resistance; the failure to adequately meet their main demand—for land—despite their enormous sacrifices during World War II and the War of Resistance against France took its toll on their morale.<sup>109</sup> Even the reductions of rent had been widely ignored before the formal decree of July 1949. The dramatic expansion of the Party from 50,000 members in 1947 to 150,000 in 1948 apparently was not accompanied by a dramatic expansion in peasant organization.<sup>110</sup> In 1948, only 820,000 peasants were enrolled in the Vietminh's peasant associations, an amazing number in light of the several millions of peasants residing in the areas that would later make up North Vietnam.<sup>111</sup>

Dissatisfaction over the slow pace of social change in villages was also growing within the army and in Vietminh controlled rural areas. As Christine White noted, "Soldiers from poor families resented the fact that, while they were off fighting, their families, even in Viet Minh controlled areas, were still paying taxes to or working for landlords, and

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<sup>107</sup> Tran Phuong, *Cach mang ruong dat*, table following page 70, in Moise, *Land Reform*, 164-165.

<sup>108</sup> White, "Agrarian Reform," 140.

<sup>109</sup> Duiker, *Communist Road*, 143.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.* During the mass mobilization for rent campaign in late 1952 and early 1953, membership in the Peasant Associations rose sharply. For example, in the Viet Bac villages, membership rose from 4,930 to 8,042 members during the campaign. Later Party rectification campaigns to purify the Party of exploitative elements also indicated that a large number of landlords and rich peasants joined the Party during these years. White, "Agrarian Reform," 177.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.* The official 1960 census for North Vietnam had the total population at sixteen million inhabitants, 80% of which were involved in agriculture. While the population certainly was larger in 1960, the figure does provide a framework for interpreting the low number of peasants involved in the peasants' associations. White, "Land Reform in North Vietnam," (Agency for International Development, June 1970), 1.

often could not earn enough rice.”<sup>112</sup> The Party began to respond to the situation and show signs of greater concentration on the anti-feudal struggle with the Second Congress of the Party in February 1951.

### **Toward a More Radical Land Reform: 1951-1953**

Throughout WWII and the following conflict with the French, the Vietnamese Communists in the interests of maintaining the national united front had maintained their overall policy of rent and interest reductions in combination with the redistribution of large landholdings owned by Vietnamese and French traitors. While national liberation remained the top priority in the minds of the Party leadership, signs of an increased emphasis on the anti-feudal struggle began to surface with the Second National Congress of the Party in February 1951. One clear sign of future change was in the Second Congress’ formation of the Vietnam Workers’ Party (VWP), which reestablished official communist leadership and reaffirmed the Marxist-Leninist orientation of the Vietnamese revolution. The explicit recognition of communist leadership represented a move away from the policies of the national united front, which attempted to cloak the Party’s role in order to attract moderate elements, and foreshadowed an increased emphasis on the domestic class struggle against feudal forces in the years to come. Another sign of the elevated importance of the anti-feudal struggle came in Truong Chinh’s keynote report, “On the Vietnamese Revolution,” in which he openly articulated socialism as the goal of the revolution and “new” or “people’s” democracy as the means to get there:

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<sup>112</sup> White, “Agrarian Reform,” 150.

People's democracy is a transitional step toward socialism. Whether the advance to socialism is rapid or slow depends on different conditions in each people's democratic country....

Under the leadership of the working class, and with the working people as the motive force, our revolution not only aims at fulfilling the anti-imperialist and anti-feudalist tasks but also at vigorously developing the people's democratic regime, at the same time, creating conditions for the advance to socialism.<sup>113</sup>

In recognizing socialism as the goal and people's democracy as a transitional stage, Truong Chinh was reaffirming the Marxist-Leninist orientation of the revolution and of the new Vietnam Workers' Party, while pressing his colleagues to begin to take active steps toward laying down the foundations for the advance to socialism.

For Truong Chinh and many other leaders, creating conditions for the advance to socialism meant paying more attention to the anti-feudal struggle in the countryside. In the same report, Truong stated, "From the class point of view, the landlord class is an enemy of the revolution. The more the revolution advances and the more democratic reforms are promoted, the stronger the antagonistic reaction of the landlord class will be."<sup>114</sup> Placing the anti-feudal struggle on a level nearly equal with that of the anti-imperialist struggle, he continued, "To gain independence and democracy and advance to the realization of socialism, the main problem facing us is now to fulfill the task of national liberation *and* carry out the objective of 'land to the tillers'" (emphasis mine).<sup>115</sup> In order to carry out the objective of "land to the tillers," according to Chinh, the anti-feudal struggle would have to be carried out "step by step" so as to develop the

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<sup>113</sup> Truong Chinh, "On the Vietnamese Revolution," (Report to the Second National Congress of the Party, February 1951), in *Selected Writings*, 294, 335.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 325.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 346.

revolutionary forces of the Vietnamese people “while maintaining broad national unity with the aim of waging the war of resistance.”<sup>116</sup>

Though not the first time mentioning it, Truong Chinh also declared that the peasantry was playing “the most important role in the national economy and [was] making the greatest contribution of manpower and resources to the war of resistance.” “*Without the participation of the peasantry,*” he emphasized, “*the Vietnamese revolution certainly cannot succeed.*”<sup>117</sup> At the same time, he also rebuked cadres “who want to confiscate all the land owned by the landlords right away and share it out among the peasants.” He stated,

We must realize that we are engaged in a war of resistance, and therefore cannot yet throw all our forces into land reform, that we can only carry out land reform in the free zones...and only in those free zones where certain conditions exist: where there is a relatively stable political situation, where the peasant masses are demanding reform, and where cadres are available to organize it.<sup>118</sup>

While still subordinating land reform to the interests of national liberation and a broad coalition of patriotic forces in 1951, signs of more drastic change and concentration on the anti-feudal struggle in the Party could already be seen in Truong Chinh’s characterization of the immediate tasks of the revolution to include not only national liberation but also redistribution of land and “sowing the seeds of socialism.” The clear implication was that after victory in the War of Resistance, radical land reform would be the top priority for the revolution.

In contrast to Truong Chinh, Ho Chi Minh gave little attention to the anti-feudal struggle in his report to the Second Congress. Other than a reaffirmation of the moderate

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 323.

<sup>117</sup> Chinh, “On the Vietnamese Revolution,” 328.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 365.

land policy under the Viet Minh, Ho made no specific references to future land redistribution, the slogan giving “land to the tillers,” or the landlord class as an enemy of the revolution. Ho’s report concentrated on the anti-imperialist task and focused thematically on military realities, long-term resistance, developing the army and the need for patriotic emulation. Perhaps more sensitive to calls for radical land reform policies for fear of alienating moderate elements, breaking up the national united front, and weakening the resistance, Ho clearly subordinated the anti-feudal struggle to the anti-imperialist struggle in his report. Overall, as Duiker summarized, “Ho’s colleagues deferred to his steady insistence on the need to place the anti-imperialist over the antifeudal struggle in Indochina, and they recognized the necessity of appealing to moderate elements in Vietnamese society.”<sup>119</sup> Yet even Ho Chi Minh openly acknowledged the goal of the Vietnamese revolution as socialism and the means to get there as “new democracy” at the end of his report, an implicit indication of a future land reform and the increasingly radical bent of the Party’s direction: “To win back national unity and complete independence, it [Vietnam Workers’ Party] leads the entire people to implement new democracy and to create conditions for the advance to socialism.”<sup>120</sup>

The Second Party Congress also represented the ascendance of Truong Chinh to the top of the Vietnamese Communist leadership. His increased stature after the Congress could be seen in a biographical sketch in the Party’s official newspaper, *Nhan Dan*, one month after the Congress, in which “Truong Chinh was described as the

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<sup>119</sup> Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh*, 439.

<sup>120</sup> Ho Chi Minh, “Political Report Read at the Second National Congress of the Vietnam Workers’ Party,” in *Ho Chi Minh On Revolution: Selected Writings 1920-1966*, ed. with introduction by Bernard B. Fall (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1967), 225.

architect and the chief of the Vietnamese revolution, while Ho Chi Minh was its soul.”<sup>121</sup>

Re-elected General Secretary of the Party, Truong’s influence could be seen in the increased calls for more radical land reform policies after the Congress. In March, just one month after the Second Congress, he addressed the National Cadres Conference of the Vietnam Peasants’ Association for National Salvation. Even though he reaffirmed the national revolution as the primary task in his address, he also reassured peasants that land reform was in the Party’s future:

Our Party’s program is to prepare the conditions for giving each peasant his own plot. The Vietnam Lao Dong Party (VWP) confirms the slogan “Land to the tillers” as perfectly legitimate. When conditions are ripe, the Party will resolutely lead the peasant masses to carry out this slogan. However, if conditions do not yet permit and if any peasant wants to make haste with the land reform, the Party will tell him “Please wait.”<sup>122</sup>

Truong would not tell peasants to “wait” for too long considering the more radical land reform came in December 1953. It is also significant that while faithfully disseminating and carrying out the Party’s moderate agrarian policies, Truong Chinh had given indications as early as 1950 that the Party should move toward the “complete realization” of the slogan “land to the tiller.”<sup>123</sup> Later, in 1960, he argued that the mass mobilization for land reform undertaken in 1953 “could have begun sooner, for example by early 1951.”<sup>124</sup>

Peasants had ample reason to believe Truong Chinh’s words about the approaching land reform. In May 1951, the DRV enacted a progressive agricultural tax, which exempted the poorest 10% of rural households, charged poor peasants rates of 6%

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<sup>121</sup> Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh*, 441.

<sup>122</sup> White, “Agrarian Reform,” 145.

<sup>123</sup> White, “Land Reform in North Vietnam,” 26.

<sup>124</sup> White, “Agrarian Reforms,” 195.

to 10% of their total agricultural income, middle peasants 15% to 20%, and rich peasants and landlords from 30-50%.<sup>125</sup> As Christine White indicated, “Many landlords found that the rent they were collecting barely covered the tax plus the cost of transporting the rice to the tax collection point, and therefore sold their land.”<sup>126</sup> At the same time, the Party still had problems enforcing the rent reduction decree. Moise indicated that in the Red River valley and northern half of Trung bo (Annam), 30% of the landlords reduced rents properly, 40% reduced rents but not to the extent required by law, and 30% did not reduce rents at all. Over 70% of the landlords in the two areas still did not comply fully with the rent-reduction decree.

### **International Context: 1949-1953**

Events in the years 1949-1953 produced a number of changes in the overarching context for agrarian reform in Vietnam. One of the most important was the French parliament’s ratification of the Elysee Accords in February 1950, which granted partial independence to a Bao Dai government in the South. The move had two major implications: first, it meant that the DRV had to contend with a rival government in the South, supported by both the French and the United States; second, it meant that the United States was increasingly concerned about a Communist triumph in Vietnam and would likely support the French significantly in terms of weapons and finances. The Elysee Accords were in part aimed at appeasing the concerns of the United States, which

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 146. Moise, *Land Reform*, 159.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

would not support the French effort unless they made attempts to win Vietnamese nationalist support.<sup>127</sup>

The Bao Dai government attracted Vietnamese supporters from wealthy nationalist elements both in urban areas and in the countryside. As White noted, the “French policy of Vietnamizing the war politically and militarily had a certain amount of success. Vietnamese were increasingly used to fight the Vietminh, and the Bao Dai government attracted many landlords, who changed their loyalties from the Vietminh.”<sup>128</sup> Aligned with the French and propertied elements in the countryside, the Bao Dai government respected landlords’ property rights; it offered elites an alternative to the DRV’s seizure of holdings belonging to “traitors and reactionaries” and redistribution of these properties to land-hungry peasants.

With the Bao Dai government competing for popular support and allying with the wealthy, propertied classes, the DRV had to clarify its position. More specifically, in the words of Christine White, “The DRV needed to define more precisely the nature of the future socio-economic system it stood for. If both sides could claim to offer political independence, only one was in a position to offer a concrete program of ‘land to the tiller.’”<sup>129</sup> As landlords and wealthy propertied elements in Vietnamese society not initially hostile to the Vietminh or allied with the French began to gravitate toward the Bao Dai government, the DRV leaders had less incentive to continue with the policies of the united front. “Civil wars,” as Thomas Lutze stated in reference to the years 1927-1934 and 1946-1949 in China, tended to “give rise to more radical policies of land seizure and redistribution as class cleavage became more pronounced, with upper and

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<sup>127</sup> Duiker, *Communist Road*, 145.

<sup>128</sup> White, “Land Reform in North Vietnam,” 25.



lower classes tending to support contending sides in the domestic conflict.”<sup>130</sup> While Vietnam was not yet at the stage of civil war in the years of the “Bao Dai” rule, the upper and lower classes were gravitating toward contending sides in the fight for Vietnamese nationalism. Landlords had already been hesitant to implement rent reduction policies and were hostile to the steep agricultural tax imposed by the DRV in 1951. The Party emphasized its commitment to a particular class when it resumed overt communist leadership of the revolution in 1951 with the founding of the Vietnam Workers’ Party, just one year after the French parliament’s ratification of the Elysee Accords. Once again, the Party had to weigh the costs and benefits of maintaining the united front and the support of more bourgeois elements with the mobilization of the vast productive and military capacities of the peasantry. Increasingly after 1951, the Party would come down on the side of peasants.

Another polarizing force in the early 1950s was the increasing intervention of the United States. Not only did the U.S. pressure the French into creating the Bao Dai government, but it also helped lead the push for the recognition among western nations of the Bao Dai government. On the one hand, the effort for recognition was intended to counter the newly created People’s Republic of China’s and the Soviet Union’s official recognition of the DRV. On the other, U.S. military and monetary support to the French and the Bao Dai government intensified the war and increased DRV worries that the U.S. would replace the French on the battlefield. While the influx of military aid from China after Mao’s victory in 1949 provided crucial support on the military front, the Vietminh still feared direct U.S. involvement. The fears only increased after the Korean armistice

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>130</sup> Lutze, “China’s New Democratic Revolution,” 109

of 1953, since U.S. attention could now be focused on Southeast Asia. The impact of Mao's victory on U.S. willingness to intervene and support the French could be seen in the words of Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, who called Vietnam and Southeast Asia the southern portion of "a single Communist Chinese aggressive front."<sup>131</sup>

The Party thus decided on a two-pronged attack to combat the joint Franco-American threat, namely to intensify the people's war and to seek a negotiated, compromise settlement with France in order to forestall a direct American invasion. In order to mobilize the manpower and vast resources of the peasantry to intensify the people's war, the Party would begin to lay down the groundwork for a radical land reform with the mass mobilization for rent reduction in 1952.

The later months of 1952 marked a dramatic shift in agrarian policy for the Party. Whereas before, Party leaders had instructed peasants to "please wait," now they actively encouraged peasants to press forward with their demands. In a report likely written by Ho Chi Minh on the overall situation of the revolution in late 1952, the Party linked the agrarian question to military victory. The report stated:

In our country "land and water" are synonymous for homeland. Heroically defending the homeland, our peasants are defending their "land and water." In order to win victory over the French colonizers and U.S. interventionists, to secure freedom and national independence we need an invincible force. We have such a force in the peasantry. In the past seven years they have proved their invincibility and their boundless patriotism...Hence, the time has come for our Party and our Government to carry out a correct agrarian policy, to give land and water to the peasants. This policy will add tenfold to our forces in struggle and will hasten our final victory.<sup>132</sup>

Going along with carrying out the anti-feudal task "step-by-step," the Party decided to

<sup>131</sup> White, "Agrarian Reform," 195-196.

<sup>132</sup> Din (pseudo.), "Great all-conquering ideas (letter from Vietnam)," *For a Lasting Peace, for a People's Democracy* (December 5, 1952, no. 49), in White, "Agrarian Reform," 151.

mobilize peasants to assume implementation of for rent and interest reduction. Rejecting the early administrative technique for reducing rents, Ho Chi Minh announced the beginning of the mass mobilization campaign in a national appeal on December 19, 1952. Before talking about mass mobilization, though, Ho admonished the Party for not implementing past agrarian policies:

One of our mistakes is that we have not correctly implemented the agrarian policy promulgated by the Government a long time ago. Nearly 90% of our population are peasants. More than 90% of soldiers in the National Defence Army, local guards, militiamen and guerillas are of peasant stock. Most of the taxpayers and volunteer workers are peasants. The peasants make the biggest contributions to the Resistance and the greatest sacrifices to the Fatherland. Nevertheless, they are the poorest people because they have not enough land to till. Reductions of land rent and interest rates which are their legitimate rights cannot be undertaken properly. This is a most unjust situation.<sup>133</sup>

What prevented the reductions of land rent and interest rate from being undertaken properly? Pham Van Dong gave a forceful and biting answer in his report to the Standing Committee of the National Assembly and the Lien Viet National Committee in February 1953:

Here, I want to speak especially about the conditions of our government in rural areas. There are places where this government has nothing which entitles it to be called a people's democratic government...It does not truly serve the peasants, but on the contrary defends the interests of the landlords and serves the landlords while it is carrying out the government's policies, such as the land policy, the agricultural taxation policy and the corvee labor policy...

For a long time, we have been criticizing the administrative cadres in the rural areas whose thought and workstyle do not have the mass standpoint and do not correctly follow the mass line. Recently, we have seen the impure organizational condition of the administrative organs in the rural areas (resistance administrative committees and people's assemblies). In many places, these organizations include a large

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<sup>133</sup> Ho Chi Minh, "Appeal on the Occasion of the Sixth Anniversary of the National-Wide Resistance," in *Selected Works*, vol. 3, (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961), 378.

proportion of landlords, rich peasants and despots or have been influenced by them.<sup>134</sup>

Pham Van Dong may have not have been very far off in his claim that many village-level organizations contained a large proportion of landlord and exploitative elements. Before a reform of village Party branches in the 22 villages that participated in the trial wave of mass mobilization, the composition of the Party leading committees was 13.5% landlord, 15% rich peasant, 61.4% middle peasant, 3.7% poor peasant and 3.5% petty bourgeois.<sup>135</sup> These numbers are significant considering that close to 60% of the population in the North were poor peasants or agricultural laborers. The answer to the disproportionate landlord and rich peasant representation in Party leading committees at the village level, according to Pham Van Dong and other leaders was mass mobilization. In the same report to the Standing Committee of the National Assembly and Lien Viet National committee, Pham Van Dong concluded:

This is a serious situation we must rectify. How can we rectify it? There is no other method than mobilizing the masses with a free hand, relying on the strength, awareness and ability of the masses to rectify it.<sup>136</sup>

Having tried administrative methods of reducing rents and interests and failed, the Party found that it had to mobilize the masses in order for the reforms to be implemented.

Several themes emerge from the examination of the reasons for mass mobilization and shed light on some of the reasons why the Party pushed forward with a radical, comprehensive land reform in 1954. One of the first themes apparent from the words and reports of Party leaders was the sense that peasants needed to be compensated for their

<sup>134</sup> Pham Van Dong quoted in White, *Agrarian Reform*, 152.

<sup>135</sup> White, "Agrarian Reform," 175.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

enormous sacrifices during the War of Resistance. Ho Chi Minh made this clear in his speech announcing the mass mobilization for rent campaign when he indicated that 90% of the people's armed forces were peasants and that the majority of taxpayers and volunteer workers were peasants. Ho Chi Minh also tied land reform and mass mobilization with the Party's military struggle. The only way the Party could fully mobilize the vast resources of peasants, who made up 90% of the population, was through land reform and the implementation of the slogan "land to the tiller." At the same time, Pham Van Dong indicated another reason in his speech on the necessity of mass mobilization, namely the purification and consolidation of the Party. In a larger sense, the Party could purify its ranks and mobilize the vast majority of peasants in light of the changing overarching contexts for agrarian reform in the early 1950s. The establishment of the Bao Dai regime in the south, backed by the French and the United States, intensified the war and made class cleavage more pronounced. The Party was in a much better position to undertake the radical land reform and break unity with the united front after Bao Dai made it apparent that he represented the propertied classes in the countryside. Increasingly, the Party recognized that the costs of breaking unity with the national united front did not outweigh the benefits of mobilizing the huge military and resource potential of the peasantry. Ho Chi Minh and the leadership of the VWP gave official recognition to this with the passing of the Land Reform Law in December 1953.

These were the domestic developments that provided the backdrop for the dramatic events on the international stage in Geneva the following year.

## **The Land Reform Law and Implications for Geneva**

Despite the mass mobilizations for rent and interest reduction, the progressive agricultural tax, and the continued confiscation of French and traitor lands, the vestiges of feudal ownership still remained in the countryside. As Table-3 and 4 indicate, if the vast productive and human resources of the peasantry, particularly the resources of the poor peasant majority, were going to be mobilized effectively for the resistance, then the Party was going to have to go one step further than the mobilization for rent reduction and implement a comprehensive land reform.

As Table-3 indicates, prior to the commencement of the land reform proper in 1954, native landlords still possessed 44% of their original holdings from 1945, a substantial amount. In terms of the amount of land owned relative to percent of the population, landlords, while comprising 1.8% of the population, still owned roughly 17% (counting land that had been scattered as theirs) of the land according to Table-4. If the land scattered is counted as being owned by the person to whom it had been scattered, landlords still owned 9.5% of the land. Rich peasants, while comprising 1.2% of the population, owned roughly 4% of the land in both “scattering” scenarios. Poor peasants and agricultural laborers, while comprising 58% of the population, owned only 17.8% (counting land that had been scattered as landlord or rich peasant land) of the total land. When scattered land is counted as belonging to the person it had been scattered to, poor peasants and agricultural laborers still owned only 23% of the land. The conclusion suggested by the data seems clear. If the distribution of “land to the tiller” was the key to releasing the productive forces in the countryside and mobilizing peasants in mass for the

resistance, as Vietnamese Communist leaders claimed, then they would have to take further action to redistribute land and break the hold of feudalism in the countryside.

Table-3 – Transfers of land to peasants from 1945 to the Beginning of Land Reform (Early 1953/Late 1954) in 3,035 *xa* of North Vietnam, which underwent land reform between 1953 and 1956

Original Ownership	Total Land Transferred (%)	Total Land Remaining (%)
French	98	2
Landlords	56	44
Catholic Church	48	52
Communal and semipublic	88	12
Total	73	27\

Source: Tran Phuong, *Cach mang ruong dat*, table following page 70, in Moise, *Land Reform*, 162-163. Calculations based off of the table provided by Moise on pages 162-163.

Table- 4: Changes in the number of households and amount of land owned by various classes between 1945 and 1953: 93 xa and 31 thon of North Vietnam

Before August 1945

	Households		Land Owned	
	Number	%	Mau	%
French			960	0.8
Catholic Church	3	0.0	1,921	1.6
Landlords	1,985	3.3	27,338	22.5
Rich Peasants	1,278	2.2	8,651	7.1
Middle Peasants	18,422	32.9	36,849	30.4
Poor Peasants	20,246	35.4	13,151	10.8
Laborers	11,785	20.6	1,513	1.2
Other laboring Classes	3,480	6.1	911	0.7
Communal and semipublic			29,844	24.6

1953 (Before Land Reform)

	Households		Land Owned*		Land Owned**	
	Number	%	Mau	%	Mau	%
French			1,169	1.0	1,169	1.0
Catholic Church	3	0.0	1,908	1.6	1,908	1.6
Landlords	1,311	1.8	27,071	17.3	11,593	9.5
Rich Peasants	854	1.2	5,359	4.4	5,003	4.1
Middle Peasants	23,774	33.6	42,095	34.6	45,490	37.4
Poor Peasants	30,706	43.5	19,065	15.7	23,751	19.5
Laborers	10,216	14.5	2,600	2.1	4,266	3.5
Other laboring classes	3,736	5.3	973	0.8	1,061	0.9
Communal and semipublic land			27,420	22.5	27,420	22.5

\*Counting land that landlords and rich peasants had scattered (illegally, according to retroactive decisions of the DRV) as still belonging to the landlords and rich peasants.

\*\* Counting land that landlords and rich peasants had scattered as belonging to the persons to whom it had been scattered.

Source: Tran Phuong, *Cach mang ruong dat*, table following page 82, in Moise, *Land Reform*, 164-165.



## Land Reform Law

The stamp of approval on a more radical land reform policy came in two key reports at the end of 1953 by Truong Chinh and Ho Chi Minh. In his report to the First National Conference of the Vietnam Workers' Party in November 1953 entitled, "Implementing the Land Reform," Truong Chinh stated,

Although the August Revolution of 1945 and the mass mobilization for reduction of land rent have brought some benefits to the peasants and some improvements to the life of the peasants, the basic demand of the peasant—land—has not yet been settled and satisfied.

It is now time to carry out a land reform, taking land from the feudal landlords and distributing it to the peasants and gaining political power in the countryside for the peasants. This is the basic method to be used in the immediate future to replenish the forces of the peasants, supply the war of resistance, develop production forces and advance our patriotic struggle.<sup>137</sup>

For the first time since the early 1930s, the Party would confiscate all landlord lands, regardless of their stance toward the national revolution. Truong frequently made the link between the radical land reform and meeting the increasing manpower needs of the resistance war, which he recognized to be a "long-drawn-out struggle." At one point, Truong stated, "Its requirements in terms of manpower and material resources is increasing daily. These are mainly contributed by the peasants; but the peasants, who have little or no land at all, are poverty-stricken."<sup>138</sup> In order to wage a protracted, guerilla war from rural areas, Ho and the leaders of the DRV had to mobilize the peasant population in support of the resistance and the Party. Ho referenced the potential power in mobilizing peasants in his report to the First National Conference of the VWP in November. He stated,

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<sup>137</sup> Truong Chinh, "Implementing Land Reform," 451.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 451.

Our power lies in the tens of millions of working peasant compatriots who are waiting for the Government and the Party to organize and lead them to stretch themselves, rise up and put to rout the slavery of feudalism and colonialism.<sup>139</sup>

Satisfying peasant demands for land was one obvious way of gaining such support. Vo Nguyen Giap attributed the VWP's crushing victory over the French at Dienbienphu in part to the great lift in morale and outpouring of "revolutionary enthusiasm" produced by word of the Party's land reform policies reaching the front.<sup>140</sup> Over 200,000 peasants carried supplies over mountains and valleys to provide crucial help to the People's Army of Vietnam during the Dienbienphu campaign.<sup>141</sup> He also noted that it was of "particular importance" to address the agrarian question since the Party "relied on the countryside to build [its] bases to launch guerilla warfare in order to encircle the enemy in the towns."<sup>142</sup> Ho Chi Minh, in his key December 1953 report to the National Assembly of the DRV on the passage of the Land Reform Law, also drew the explicit link between land reform and mobilizing peasants for the resistance, particularly in the long-term.<sup>143</sup> He stated,

The more the Resistance War develops, the more manpower and wealth it requires, and our peasants have contributed the greatest part of manpower and wealth to the Resistance. We must liberate them from the feudal yoke, foster them in order to mobilize this huge force for the Resistance to win victory.<sup>144</sup>

<sup>139</sup> Ho Chi Minh quoted in White, "Agrarian Reform," 209.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 231. Tran Phuong also mentioned the boost in morale at Dienbienphu resulting from word of the new land policies reaching the front. Tran Phuong, "The Land Reform," 189.

<sup>141</sup> Qiang Zhai, *China and Vietnam*, 42.

<sup>142</sup> Vo Nguyen Giap, *People's War People's Army*, excerpted in *Vietnam and America*, Gettleman, ed., 54.

<sup>143</sup> The Land Reform Law called for the confiscation of all landlord lands, though distinctions were made among the landlord class. The initial class line that was promulgated for land reform by Ho Chi Minh was "rely fully on the poor and landless peasant, unite closely with the middle peasants, ally ourselves with the rich peasants, wipe out the regime of feudal exploitation gradually and judiciously, and develop production and the resistance. Ho Chi Minh quoted in Truong Chinh, "Implementing the Land Reform," 459.

<sup>144</sup> Ho Chi Minh, "Report to the National Assembly of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam," in *On Revolution*, 264.

Ho Chi Minh and the leaders of the DRV were confident that land reform would mobilize the huge resources of the peasantry for both the resistance and the party. Their confidence stemmed from the land reform experiences of other countries, namely those of the Chinese Communists in China. Ho referenced such experiences in his report to the National Assembly:

The experiences of other countries have taught us that successful land reform will help us overcome many difficulties and solve many problems.

In the military field, our peasant compatriots will take part in the Resistance War more enthusiastically, thus helping the development of the Army and the mobilization of the people for voluntary labor to serve the Resistance. Our soldiers will have less worry about their families and will fight more fiercely.<sup>145</sup>

While Ho did not explicitly mention China in this section of his report, it is clear that he was referring to the experiences of the Chinese Communists. In 1950, the Party had initiated a massive study campaign of the CCP's experiences during their War of Resistance to Japan. The campaign, according to King Chen, "was carried to almost every Viet-Minh unit, civilian and military."<sup>146</sup> He provided a description of the study China campaign in his book, *China and Vietnam, 1938-1954*:

Cadres were urged, sometimes even demanded, to read, discuss, and draw lessons from Chinese writings. Some 30 to 40 documents by Mao Tse-tung, Chu The, and Liu Shao-Ch'i were translated into Vietnamese. By late 1953, 47 writings had been published in Vietnamese and 193,880 copies distributed; of these, 57,305 were copies of 17 different works by Mao. Ho himself translated Mao's *On Practice* and *On Contradiction*. The most popular were Mao's *On Protracted War*, *The Chinese Revolution and the Chinese Communist Party*, *On New Democracy*, and *On People's Democratic Dictatorship*.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 267.

<sup>146</sup> King Chen, *Vietnam and China*, 240.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

In addition to the study China campaign, the CCP had sent forty-two land reform specialists to Vietnam in 1953 under the umbrella of the Chinese Political Advisory Group, headed by Luo Guibo, to help with the Party's mobilization efforts.<sup>148</sup> As was stated earlier, Chinese military advisers planned and often helped direct Vietminh military operations. The combination of military aid and assistance from the Chinese Military Advisory Group contributed significantly to the success of the Vietnamese Communist resistance in the early 1950s. Evidence that Ho's statement referenced the experiences of the Chinese Communists specifically could also be seen in the overarching new-democratic framework of the Vietnamese revolution.

For the CCP, land reform had proved to be an effective and essential tool in mobilizing peasants for the resistance and the Party during its bid for power after World War II. In his speech at the Opening Ceremony of the National Land Conference in July 1947, Chinese Communist Party leader Zhu De had stated, in reference to the link between land reform and peasant participation in the army, "In places where the land reform was satisfactorily carried out, the Party organization was consolidated, the army became stronger than before and military victories were won." He also indicated that "peasants support us in order to defend the fruits of this struggle."<sup>149</sup> In the words of Thomas Lutze, "Land reform mobilized millions of peasants to take up arms and to support in other ways the People's Liberation Army that swept to victory in 1949."<sup>150</sup> Ho Chi Minh, Truong Chinh, and Vo Nguyen Giap explicitly mentioned these themes – mobilizing peasants to take up arms and to support the resistance in other ways – in their

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<sup>148</sup> Qiang Zhai, *China and Vietnam*, 39.

<sup>149</sup> Zhu De, "Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the National Land Conference," (June 17, 1947) in *Selected Works of Zhu De* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1986), 211.

various reports about the necessity of land reform in 1953 and early 1954.

The overarching contexts for land reform in the early 1950s also surfaced in Ho's report. He stated,

Interfering more deeply in the war in Viet-Nam, Cambodia, and Laos, the Americans give the French and the puppets more money and weapons....They have a plan to replace the French step by step, but continue to use the latter as stooges in the implementation of their war policy.<sup>151</sup>

For Ho Chi Minh, one way to undermine the American policy of intervention and extension of the war would be to reach a political settlement. Ho frequently mentioned in his report that the Franco-American enemy was "afraid of the world peace movement." In order to bring the French and Americans to a negotiated settlement, the Party had to speed up the Resistance War and inflict a significant defeat on the Franco-American enemy. *Nhan Dan* editorials in August 1953 indicated that peace could only come to Vietnam when the "resistance is stronger, destroying much more of the manpower of the enemy and the puppets and making it impossible for them to carry on the war of aggression."<sup>152</sup> The siege at Dienbienphu provided the Party with an opportunity to deal the French a significant blow before the United States could directly intervene that would help drive them to the negotiating table. In his "Appeal to All Cadres and Fighters on the Beginning of the Dienbienphu Campaign," Vo Nguyen Giap indicated that a successful siege would be a "worthy contribution to the world peace movement demanding an end to the war in Vietnam-Cambodia-Laos, especially at a time when the French Government

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<sup>150</sup> Thomas Lutze, "China's New Democratic Revolution: Complexities of the 'Anti-Feudal Struggle, 1945-1949,'" *Journal of the Southwest Conference on Asian Studies* 3 (2001): 107.

<sup>151</sup> Ho Chi Minh, "Report to the National Assembly of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam," 62.

<sup>152</sup> Extracts from "Editorials in *Nhan Dan*," (August 16-20, 1953) in *Vietnam: A History in Documents*, Gareth Porter, ed. (New York: Earl M. Coleman Enterprises, 123.

is being defeated continuously and has begun to have to talk of negotiating in order to peacefully resolve the problem of war in Indochina.”<sup>153</sup>

Ho Chi Minh and the leaders of the DRV expressed a desire to reach a political settlement not only to avoid a direct American military intervention in Vietnam but also to *ensure the success of land reform*. In his report to the National Assembly, Ho stated,

For these eight years, our entire people have been carrying out the greatest task, which is to conduct the Resistance War. From now on, we have another central task, which is land reform. We must endeavor to speed up the Resistance War *in order to vouch for the success of land reform*. We must exert all our efforts to implement land reform in order to secure *complete* victory for the Resistance War [emphasis mine].<sup>154</sup>

Vo Nguyen Giap also mentioned in his appeal on the beginning of the Dienbienphu campaign that the battle, the point of which was to bring France to negotiation, would help to “ensure the success of land reform.”<sup>155</sup>

Since speeding up the Resistance War meant increasing military pressure to reach a political settlement in the hopes of preventing a direct American military intervention, Ho’s statement indicated that the Party also wanted to reach a political settlement to ensure the success of land reform, which was central to mobilizing the masses for a protracted war *with the United States*. It is important to note that Ho believed land reform was essential to the “*complete*” victory of the Resistance War. The increasing intervention of the United States in the early and mid 1950s alarmed the Party leadership and aroused suspicions of a future American military intervention. These suspicions only increased after comments made by American politicians after the Korean armistice. In

<sup>153</sup> Vo Nguyen Giap, “Appeal by Giap to All Cadres,” 131.

<sup>154</sup> Ho Chi Minh, “Report to the National Assembly of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam,” December 1953, in *Ho Chi Minh On Revolution*, 259.

<sup>155</sup> “Report by Giap to Senior Field Commanders on the Dienbienphu Campaign,” (January 14, 1954) in *Vietnam: A History in Documents*, 130.

November 1953, then Vice-President Richard Nixon alluded to a future American military intervention, stating, “It is impossible to lay down arms until final victory is completely won.”<sup>156</sup> Secretary of State John Foster Dulles indicated that one of the lessons from Korea was that the U.S. should “make clear its intentions in advance,” so that the adversary would “take this into his calculations.”<sup>157</sup> The U.S. certainly was making its intentions clear in its military and financial support of the French. According to Ngo Vinh Long, “U.S. aid accounted for close to 80 percent of the French war expenditure for the 1953-1954 period, and airlifts were organized from France, the Philippines, and Japan for supplies to the French.”<sup>158</sup> Ho expressed worries of an American military intervention at the 6<sup>th</sup> Plenum of the Party Central Committee during the Geneva negotiations, when he told cadres that “our successes have awakened the American imperialists.” He instructed the Central Committee that it “must take firm hold of the banner of peace to oppose the U.S. imperialists’ policy of direct intervention.”<sup>159</sup>

But if the banner of peace failed, the Party needed to mobilize the vast resources of the peasantry, the “invincible force” of the revolution in the words of Ho himself. In light of the comments made by Nixon and Dulles, the Party needed to have the full support of the peasantry in order to wage a likely protracted war against the United States. There was also the risk that negotiation for a political settlement at Geneva would break down, and Ho and the leaders of the VWP needed the resolute backing of the peasantry in order to wage a protracted war against a world superpower with mammoth

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<sup>156</sup> Richard Nixon quoted in White, “Agrarian Reform,” 196.

<sup>157</sup> John Foster Dulles quoted in White, “Agrarian Reform,” 196.

<sup>158</sup> Ngo Vinh Long, “The Franco-Vietnamese War: Origins of US Involvement,” in Gettleman, *Vietnam and America*, 39.

<sup>159</sup> “Report by Ho Chi Minh to the Sixth Plenum of the Party Central Committee,” (July 15, 1954) in Gareth Porter, *Vietnam: The Definitive Documentation of Human Decisions*, 635.

military and industrial strength. The Party, though, could not expect to mobilize the peasantry through the continuation of moderate agrarian policies; it could only mobilize peasants by satisfying their demand for land. Dissatisfaction at the slow pace of change in the countryside, as stated earlier, was already growing among poor peasants and revolutionary soldiers. Peasants had been making the greatest manpower, military, and financial contributions to the Resistance War as well as the greatest sacrifices, yet for twelve years, the Party had told them to “please wait” for land reform in the interests of preserving the united front. The mass mobilization of the peasantry for the resistance could only be achieved through a radical land reform, and *that* was the lesson learned from the land reform experiences of the Chinese Communists. For the CCP, land reform mobilized millions of peasants to take up arms and to support the PLA and Party that swept to victory in 1949. The VWP leadership hoped land reform would do the same in Vietnam; it had to mobilize peasants on a mass scale before the United States directly intervened.

The increasing intervention of the United States in the early 1950s and the establishment of the Bao Dai regime in the South made the Party’s decision for land reform easier. With the Bao Dai regime attracting wealthy, propertied elements in the countryside, the Party had less incentive for maintaining the united front and its moderate agrarian policies. The benefits of land reform in terms of the mobilization of the vast military, manpower, and productive forces of the peasantry more than outweighed the costs of breaking unity with the national united front, a point only strengthened by the increasing intervention of the United States. Land reform would also have the benefit of undermining a domestic political competitor backed by France and the United States in



the South because its puppet troops would have to come from the peasant class.

Referring to effects land reform would have on territories controlled by Bao Dai, Ho Chi Minh stated to the National Assembly:

The enemy actively uses Vietnamese to fight Vietnamese and feeds war by war. They are doing their utmost to deceive, divide, and exploit our people. Land reform will exert an influence on and encourage our peasant compatriots in the enemy rear to struggle more enthusiastically against the enemy, in order to liberate themselves and more enthusiastically to support the Democratic Republic Government; at the same time it exerts an influence on and disintegrates the puppet army because the absolute majority of the puppet soldiers are peasants in enemy-occupied territories.<sup>160</sup>

The Bao Dai government had no interest in curtailing the power of landlords since its support came from wealthy, propertied elements in the countryside. Bao Dai's use of "Vietnamese to fight Vietnamese" was now nothing short of civil war. While peasants in the DRV would be rewarded with land for their resistance to the French, Bao Dai peasant soldiers would be rewarded with the continuance of poverty and rural oppression. Furthermore, the areas plagued the worse by landlordism were the very areas controlled by the French and Bao Dai.

Only a political settlement could provide the necessary conditions for land reform and the mobilization of the peasantry. Truong Chinh laid out the necessary conditions in his report to the First National Conference of the VWP in November 1953, all of which would finally be met in the North by a political settlement at Geneva:

Only those places in which all the following three conditions obtain shall mobilize the masses to carry out the land reform:

1. A stable military and political situation.
2. Most of the people actively demand a land reform.

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<sup>160</sup> Ho Chi Minh, "Report to the National Assembly of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam," 264.

3. There are enough cadres to lead the mass campaign for the reform.<sup>161</sup>

In order to unleash the forces of violent class struggle in the countryside for peasant mobilization, particularly for poor peasant mobilization, the Party needed to have relatively peaceful and stable conditions. The complete transformation of centuries-year old class and social relations was a traumatic experience for villages in itself, let alone the prospect of conducting it while fighting a fierce, no-boundaries war. In the words of Ho Chi Minh in his report to the National Assembly, “Land reform is a peasant revolution, a class struggle in the countryside; it is a large-scale, hard, and complicated struggle.”<sup>162</sup> Areas conducting land reform needed security from outside attack during this period of immense agrarian upheaval. In *People’s War People’s Army*, Giap indicated that the Party “carried out with great firmness” the mobilization of the masses for land reform “as soon as the stabilization of the situation allowed it.”<sup>163</sup>

Party leaders could not create stable and peaceful conditions throughout the country by simply launching an all-out military assault on the French in hopes of completely expelling them from Vietnam, for that would draw the very American intervention they hoped to avoid. Yet, at the same time, the Party needed to increase military pressure on the French to bring about a political settlement and to acquire the most territory possible before a potential cease-fire. The Dienbienphu siege accomplished both for the Party. It helped “secure the success of land reform,” in the words of Giap, by increasing the amount of territory held securely by the Vietminh and by pushing the French toward a negotiated settlement. The more territory under its

<sup>161</sup> Truong Chinh, “Implementing the Land Reform, 502-503.

<sup>162</sup> Ho Chi Min, “Report to the National Assembly of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam,” 267.

<sup>163</sup> Vo Nguyen Giap, *People’s War People’s Army* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger Publisher, 1962), 45.

control, the more peasant manpower and military resources the Party could mobilize through land reform after the settlement. That is why the acceptance of the seventeenth parallel rather than the thirteenth or fourteenth, which would have corresponded to the actual military situation, was such a significant compromise for the VWP.

Ho Chi Minh and the leaders of the DRV needed relatively peaceful and stable conditions to implement land reform and class struggle in the countryside, no matter how temporary, in order to mobilize the vast resources of the peasantry for a protracted war with the United States. Qiang Zhai presented evidence in his book, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975*, that VWP leaders decided in March 1954 politburo meetings that it would be beneficial to temporarily divide the nation.<sup>164</sup> Temporarily partitioning the country was beneficial to the Party because it gave them a large, secure and peaceful area to conduct the land reform deemed so crucial to mobilizing peasants and winning the long-term resistance war. While the Vietminh may have had the strength to defeat the French on the battlefield within a few years, Ho Chi Minh doubted whether the DRV had the strength in early 1953 and 1954 to take on the vast industrial and military might of the United States. He chided colleagues during the Sixth Plenum in July 1954 who saw the “French but not the Americans.” The Party would have the military and political strength to carry on a protracted war against the United States after the mobilization of peasants through radical land reform and the unleashing of class struggle in the countryside. The Geneva Conference provided the Party with the very opportunity to create the peaceful and stable conditions necessary for land reform.

## Conclusion

For the leaders of the VWP, a political settlement and temporary partition of the country would not only deflect an immediate United States military intervention while appeasing Chinese and Russian allies but also allow the VWP to mobilize the vast productive and human capacities of the peasantry for a protracted war with the United States. The leadership undertook the land reform for other reasons too, many of which had roots in the historical development of the Revolution. Certainly, the Party felt obliged to give peasants land because of their enormous sacrifices during World War II and the War of Resistance to France. During those years, the Party pursued a policy of moderation toward landlords in the interests of preserving the national united front. With the establishment of the Bao Dai regime in the South and the increasing intervention of the United States in the early 1950s, the overarching context for agrarian reform changed. Now faced with a domestic rival drawing support from the landed classes in the countryside, the Party had less incentive to maintain the united front. The Party decided that the mobilization of the peasantry would more than outweigh the costs of breaking unity with the richer elements in the countryside, which were beginning to side with the Bao Dai regime anyway.

In order to undertake the land reform deemed so essential to the mobilization of peasants for a protracted war against the United States, the Party needed relatively stable and peaceful conditions. They could not simply “speed up the Resistance War” by launching an all-out military assault on the French in hopes of completely expelling them

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<sup>164</sup> Qiang Zhai, *China and Vietnam*, 51.

from Vietnam, for that would draw American intervention. The only way to ensure the success of land reform while avoiding direct American intervention was to find a political settlement at Geneva.

At the end of his report to the National Assembly in 1953, Ho Chi Minh stated, “To carry out land reform is to secure victory for the Resistance War.” For the most part, Ho was correct. Certainly land reform helps to explain why millions of poor peasants sacrificed and suffered to support the Party during its terribly destructive protracted war against the United States. While the Party committed a number of well-documented abuses during its execution, the land reform campaign and its public rectification of errors, in the words of Marilyn Young, only “deepened popular support for the government.”<sup>165</sup> It also served to undermine any agrarian policies put forth by the various governments in Saigon, since all of them relied upon the wealthy, propertied elements in the countryside and could not match the attractiveness of the VWP land program. Just as in China, land reform in Vietnam mobilized millions of peasants to support the people’s armed forces and the Party between 1954 and 1975. In order to conduct the mobilization through land reform, the Party needed relatively peaceful and stable conditions in 1954. The Geneva Conference provided the Party with the perfect opportunity to create those conditions, while at the same time avoiding a direct United States military intervention and expansion of the war.

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<sup>165</sup> Young, *The Vietnam Wars*, 60.

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