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# Building Socialism in North Vietnam after Geneva

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## Introduction

With the signing of the Geneva Accords in July of 1954, the French Indochina War came to a close. Leaders of Vietnam's Communist Party, officially the Vietnamese Workers' Party (VWP), were now the masters of an internationally recognized entity named the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN, or North Vietnam).[1] They also gained exclusive administrative authority over all Vietnamese territory north of the 17th parallel. Yet the DRVN's revolutionary leaders had founded their state in September 1945 as a political entity comprising the entirety of Vietnam, not just the northern half. Scholars continue to debate basic questions related to North Vietnamese politics and strategy during the years from 1954 to 1963, the critical period when the fragile post–Geneva peace transitioned into the Vietnam War. Did some VWP leaders ever come to see the partition of the country as a regrettable but acceptable long-term solution? Or did they always plan and expect to use armed force to overthrow the rival regime in the South and unify the country under their party's control?[2]

The answers to these questions are intertwined with some of the more immediate policy choices that Hồ Chí Minh and the rest of the VWP Politburo faced after Geneva. Having negotiated and endorsed the Geneva Accords, how did DRVN leaders intend to implement their provisions?[3] What would

1 For summaries of the DRVN's overall situation after the French Indochina War, see Balazs Szalontai, "Political and Economic Crisis in North Vietnam," *Journal of Cold War History* 5 (4) (2005), 395–426; Pierre Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War: 1954–1965* (Berkeley, 2013); Ilya V. Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam: Soviet Policy toward the Indochina Conflict, 1954–1963* (Stanford, 2003); Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950–1975* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000).

2 On the strategic debates among party leaders, see Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2012); Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War*.

3 On the DRVN and the Geneva Accords, see Pierre Asselin, "Choosing Peace: Hanoi and the Geneva Agreement on Vietnam, 1954–1955," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 9 (2)

be the fate of the Maoist-inspired "land reform" campaign, which the party leaders had begun on a limited basis in DRVN-controlled areas of northern and central Vietnam in the spring of 1953? More fundamentally, what type of state would be constructed in the North? During the war, many DRVN intellectuals and at least some segments of the Northern population seem to have accepted that prosecuting a war required a state with broad-reaching powers. But now that the war had ended, would the party leaders relax their authoritarian approach and allow more scope for individual initiative and expression? The answers to these and other policy questions facing North Vietnam's leaders in 1954 would profoundly impact the course and outcome of the Vietnam War.

For most of the French Indochina War, the DRVN regime had governed primarily in the countryside. With the signing of the Geneva Accords, the regime could now return to the major cities in the northern half of the country.[4] The most important was Hanoi, which lay in the middle of the Red River Delta and had served as the capital of ancient Vietnamese kingdoms dating back to 1010. Another was Hải Phòng. It was the largest port in the North and served as Hanoi's connection to the sea. During the war, these cities and a few strategically important provincial capitals had been controlled by the French and their allied Vietnamese regime, the State of Vietnam (SVN). Now these urban centers would be administered by the DRVN. The same was true of a modestly sized but densely populated portion of the Red River Delta.

Since the most destructive fighting during the war had occurred in the northern half of the country, the DRVN faced many material challenges. These included securing adequate food for the population, fixing damaged infrastructure (roads, bridges, railways, dikes, etc.), and activating important economic assets left behind in poor condition by the departing French. Another challenge for the North was its economic separation from the South. In normal years, the rice-deficit North would import thousands of tons of rice from the rice-surplus South. Now that the two halves of the country were locked in Cold War economic and political competition, the North

(Spring 2007), 95–126; Robert F. Randle, *Geneva 1954: The Settlement of the Indochinese War* (Princeton, 1969); Philippe Devillers and Jean Lacouture, *End of a War: Indochina, 1954*, Alexander Lievan and Adam Roberts (trans.) (New York, 1969).

4 Uyen Nguyen, "Guerillas in the City: The Communist Takeover and the Making of a Socialist Bureaucracy in Hanoi, 1954–1960," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 17 (1) (2022). For a history of the First Indochina War, see Christopher Goscha, *The Road to Dien Bien Phu* (Princeton, 2022), 1–52; Yves Gras, *Histoire de la guerre d'Indochine: l'aventure coloniale de la France* (Paris, 1990).

would have to depend on its own agricultural resources and on the largesse of communist-bloc allies.[5]

Historians have faced difficulties in determining the economic performance of the DRVN during the 1950s and 1960s. Until 1986, Vietnam's party leaders considered yearly economic statistics to be "classified material" and restricted their distribution to "an extremely limited number of targets in Government offices."[6] In more recent years, the country's economists have gained access to DRVN statistics dating back to the post–1954 period. Here, though, these researchers have encountered another obstacle: the questionable accuracy of the economic numbers. For example, official statistics on agricultural production during the latter half of the 1950s indicate that, by 1959, rice production in the North had soared to a level 93% greater than that recorded in 1939, the last peaceful year of French colonialism. Moreover, the statistics indicate that the productivity of the North's rice fields in 1959 was the highest in Southeast Asia. Was that true?

One of Vietnam's most respected economic historians, Đặng Phong (1937–2010), discusses these extraordinary statistics in his pathbreaking book, *Economic History of Vietnam: 1945–2000*. According to Phong, two theories have emerged among Vietnamese economists to explain these figures from 1959. The first holds that they are largely accurate and resulted from sensible state policies, good weather, peasant enthusiasm, and unusually high soil-fertility levels.

The second theory holds that the 1959 numbers are simply inaccurate. As Phong explains, "This is absolutely possible given the limited means available for collecting accurate statistics at that time and the tendency of officials to exaggerate their results in order to score points with superiors …"[7] In 1959, that tendency toward exaggeration may have been especially strong because North Vietnam was in the middle of agricultural collectivization. Seeking justification for this controversial reorganization of economic life, party leaders likely signaled to local officials that low productivity numbers would be interpreted as a sign of poor job performance. Moreover, collectivization occurred against the backdrop of the regime's ever-present desire to cast the North as prosperous compared to the rival South. In Phong's view, another factor

5 For discussions of that aid, see Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam*, 59; Zhai, "Consolidation and Unification," in *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 65–111.

6 Trần Văn Thọ et al., *Kinh tế Việt Nam, 1955–2000: Tính toán mới, Phân tích mới* [The Vietnamese Economy, 1955–2000: New Calculations, New Analysis] (Hanoi, 2000), 37.

7 Đặng Phong, *Lịch sử kinh tế Việt Nam: 1945–2000, tập 2: 1955–1975* [Economic History of Vietnam, vol. 2: 1955–1975] (Hanoi, 2005), 272–5.

potentially leading to exaggeration was Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward happening next door at the time.[8] During those years, China was North Vietnam's most important ally and thus influenced events in the DRVN.

The impressions of foreign diplomats in Hanoi during the post–Geneva period provide an imperfect but important alternative view of the country's overall economic situation. Even foreign diplomats from the communist bloc could not travel freely in North Vietnam. Thus, for most of their information they depended on their Vietnamese hosts, who were eager to provide narratives that would lead to more aid. Still, diplomats could observe slices of daily life in Hanoi and compare notes with counterparts in other embassies. Generally, the impressions of these foreigners support the second of the two theories (inflated productivity numbers). For example, members of the Hungarian Embassy saw a range of problems in the DRVN during this time: high unemployment, escalating inflation, low wages, economic mismanagement, scarcity of consumer goods, and widespread political discontent. During the spring of 1957, a Polish diplomat opined (in the words of one scholar) that "economic conditions were worse in the DRVN than in South Vietnam" and that the "northern economy showed signs of a continuing decline."[9]

All in all, it seems safe to conclude that the DRVN regime, with help from China and the Soviet Union, did well to survive a variety of economic challenges facing it after the Geneva Armistice. The most important was a dire food shortage during 1954 and 1955.[10] However, it is one thing to survive an economic challenge and another to overcome it. (Food scarcity and periodic hunger would remain realities of everyday life for most Northerners until the late 1980s.) As we will see, attempts by North Vietnam's leaders to overcome challenges almost always involved a strengthening of the state and a broadening of its reach into society (Figure 16.1).

## The Geneva Accords and the Land Reform Campaign

The DRVN's leaders were especially concerned about three provisions of the Geneva Accords. The first, of course, was the Final Declaration's seventh point stating that national elections were to be held in July 1956 to unify the

8 Ibid., 273.
9 Szalontai, "Political and Economic Crisis," 408.
10 Ibid., 404; Mieczyslaw Maneli, *War of the Vanquished*, Maria de Gorgey (trans.) (New York, 1971), 38–9.

Figure 16.1 Three People's Army of Vietnam soldiers supervise women carrying yokes after the French turned control of Hanoi over to the DRVN in accordance with the peace agreement reached at Geneva (1954).
Source: Bettmann / Contributor / Bettmann / Getty Images.

country. At a minimum, this declaration affirmed in an internationally recognized document the principle of Vietnamese unification. It also helped the party leaders present the Geneva Accords to the Vietnamese people as a victory for the DRVN side and as proof that the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China (PRC), who had played important roles in the negotiations, had been good advocates of the DRVN cause. This narrative mattered. With the United States emerging as a powerful ally of the rival SVN regime, the domestic prestige of the DRVN leaders was increasingly tied to the reputations of their communist-bloc allies.

But the 1956 elections were not the only provision of the agreements that mattered to DRVN leaders. As revealed in the internal DRVN and VWP sources to which scholars now have access, senior leaders also ascribed special importance to articles 14c and 14d of the cessation of hostilities with France. The first provision stated that all sides (the French and SVN in the South and the DRVN regime in the North) would "refrain from any reprisals or



https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316225240.021 Published online by Cambridge University Press

discrimination against persons or organizations on account of their activities during the hostilities and [would] guarantee their democratic liberties." The second promised that, during a period of three hundred days, from July 1954 to May 1955, "any civilians residing in a district controlled by one party who wish to go and live in the zone assigned to the other party shall be permitted and helped to do so by the authorities in that district."[11]

The "no reprisals" and "freedom of movement" provisions of the Geneva Accords had important implications for the DRVN regime's most controversial policy, the Mass Mobilization through Rent Reduction and Land Reform, usually referred to by Vietnamese and foreigners alike as simply "the land reform." The party leaders had decided upon this policy of radical social and economic transformation in November of 1952, a time of stalemate and difficulty in the French Indochina War. Based on Maoist models and planned with the help of Chinese Communist Party advisors, the land reform involved sending thousands of cadres into the northern Vietnamese countryside to divide communities into social classes, teach villagers about class struggle, organize public trials of alleged class enemies (followed in many cases by public executions), and oversee the redistribution of land and personal belongings confiscated from alleged "landlords." The campaign also involved a large purge of the party's apparatus in the countryside.[12]

The battle of Điện Biên Phủ and the subsequent Geneva Armistice interrupted the land reform campaign and transformed the conditions of war that had been part of the policy's justification. Hồ Chí Minh and other party leaders had promoted this "land-to-the-tiller" campaign, both internally and externally, as a necessary means of inspiring and "mobilizing" an exhausted North Vietnamese peasantry to fight harder in the war.[13] Moreover, the no-reprisals article of the Geneva Accords directly contradicted the spirit of

11 Randle, *Geneva 1954*, 596.

12 On North Vietnam's land reform campaign, see Edwin Moise, *Land Reform in China and North Vietnam: Consolidating the Revolution at the Village Level* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1983); Olivier Tessier, "Le 'grand bouleversement' (*long trời lở đất*): regards croisés sur la réforme agraire en République démocratique du Viêt Nam," *Bulletin de l'École francaise d'Extrême-Orient* (2008), 73–134; Bertrand de Hartingh, *Entre le people et la nation: La République démocratique du Viêt Nam de 1953 à 1957* (Paris, 2003); Alex Thai Vo, "Nguyễn Thị Năm and the Land Reform in North Vietnam, 1953," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 10 (1) (Winter 2015), 1–62; Alec Holcombe, *Mass Mobilization in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam* (Honolulu, 2020).

13 See, for example, Hồ Chí Minh's original announcement of the move to land reform: "Lời kêu gọi của Hồ Chủ tịch nhân dịp kỷ niệm 6 năm toàn quốc kháng chiến" [Appeal to the Vietnamese People on the Occasion of the Sixth Anniversary of the National Resistance Struggle], *Nhân Dân* 87 (December 19, 1952).

the land reform campaign, which was largely about ferreting out and ruthlessly punishing alleged "class exploiters" and "traitors" in rural communities.

After Geneva, DRVN leaders wanted to continue the land reform campaign but worried about being accused of violating the no-reprisals provision of the accords. Such accusations would undermine the regime's public message of earnest implementation to facilitate the national elections scheduled for mid-1956. In early November of 1954, the party's general secretary, Trường Chinh, released an internal memo describing changes to the way that the land reform would be carried out. The adjustments involved streamlining the campaign's punishment process, stressing the campaign's (minimal) judicial bona fides, and changing some of its official language so that the regime did not appear to be targeting political opponents.[14]

Party leaders also worried that the Geneva Accords' freedom-of-movement provision would disrupt the land reform campaign. According to Article 14(d), any person who feared becoming a target of the land reform should have been able to leave the North and thus avoid public denunciation, imprisonment, and possible execution. By the autumn of 1954, DRVN leaders realized that hundreds of thousands of Northerners might leave for the South. To avoid the loss of land-reform struggle targets and to reduce departures in general, Hồ Chí Minh and his lieutenants delayed implementing the campaign in areas where residents had the easiest access to routes to the South.

Especially concerning to the party leaders were the activities of the ad hoc international organization formed at Geneva to monitor implementation of the accords. Referred to as the International Control Commission (ICC), this body was comprised of Canadian, Polish, and Indian members. ICC monitoring groups were supposed to be able to travel freely in both North and South Vietnam to ensure compliance with the accords. A September 26, 1954, directive from the Party Secretariat discussed how local cadres in the North should prepare in the event of an ICC visit. The passage reflects the regime's siege mentality and its determination to control any interactions between locals and foreign outsiders:

> Frequently the Control Commission will visit locations to inspect and investigate. Aside from investigating specific issues, they will try to find a way to figure out all aspects of our general situation. They could go to a place and start asking the locals questions, etc. Therefore, we need to prepare and let

14 Alec Holcombe, "The Complete Collection of Party Documents: Listening to the Party's Official Internal Voice," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 5 (2) (Summer, 2005), 225–42.

> those local people know how to respond cleverly to the International Control Commission's questions; we cannot just let them say whatever they want.[15]

By November 1954, DRVN leaders were furious with local party officials for taking an allegedly passive approach to the emigration. Cadres working in provinces south of Hanoi estimated that about one quarter of the region's large Catholic population had already departed and that an "important part" of the remainder was preparing to leave. In response, Trường Chinh suggested three tactics for suppressing emigration to the South. First, cadres were to infiltrate the Catholic Church and try to sow divisions among priests. Second, on the propaganda front, the regime was to try harder to convince Catholics that the DRVN state would respect religious freedom. Third, cadres were to use trials and punishments as a means of intimidating priests into stopping their calls for Catholics to go south. The contradictory and deceptive nature of these tactics reflected the desire of party leaders to make the DRVN appear to be upholding the no-reprisals and freedom-of-movement articles rather than undermining them:

> [Cadres] need to collect enough evidence and then punish some of the reactionary ringleaders, accusing them before the masses in order to warn others. [Cadres] need to make sure that, when accusing [these ringleaders], they must be convicted of violating the ceasefire agreement and violating the people's democratic freedoms, such as catching the people, confining them in one place, and sending them away without asking the permission of our government, etc.

A few weeks after goading cadres into being more aggressive in their efforts to prevent Northerners from emigrating, the party leaders organized a "public meeting" in Hanoi's opera house to stage an official protest against violations of the Geneva Accords by Ngô Đình Diệm and his American backers in the South. A subsequent Politburo directive outlined plans for "resisting our opponents' blatant violations of the Geneva Accords."

The internal directives of the party leaders show increasing frustration at their inability to slow the emigration and a growing willingness to take bolder measures to achieve this goal. A February 1955 Politburo directive warned that large numbers of people were still preparing to go south. To prevent this outcome, the authors proposed an elaborate plan of deception:

> Choose a few model places where we will organize to help people emigrate (after choosing the place, check it with the Central Committee). We should

15 Ibid.

> invite the International Control Commission to come and witness what we do there. These model places must be areas where we have a mass base so that when we organize to help people leave, only a few people actually ask to go. This is the only way that helps our cause. This work must be carefully planned so that it can be implemented rapidly.
>
> We must have a plan to crush reactionaries, to increase vigilance, to tighten our control, and to prevent the enemy from exploiting this opportunity to speed up concentration of the masses and create more troubles for us.

A month later, VWP leaders Phạm Văn Đồng and Võ Nguyên Giáp delivered long reports to the DRVN National Assembly touting Hanoi's "absolute" (*triệt để*) adherence to the Geneva Accords and condemning the many violations committed by the "opposition" regime in Saigon.[16]

In hindsight, the statements and orders issued by VWP leaders during 1954–5 indicate a cynical approach to the Geneva Accords. What emerges from these materials is the determination of DRVN leaders to defend and promote the reputations of their party and state at any cost. The DRVN state had to be portrayed as scrupulously upholding the terms of the accords while also enjoying the overwhelming support of the population. Party leaders would not tolerate dissent, no matter its source. This applied to the voices of that segment of the population most likely to resist being stage-managed: DRVN intellectuals.

## Destalinization and Intellectual Protest: 1956

DRVN writers, scholars, painters, and musicians, though loyal to the regime, had long been frustrated by the party's tight and sometimes corrupt management of cultural life.[17] The extraordinary conditions of war, the noble cause of national independence, and the military brilliance of the DRVN leaders had led most of the regime's intellectuals to tolerate party control over their

16 Ibid.

17 On intellectual protest in the DRVN during the period from 1955 to 1960, see Georges Boudarel, *Cent fleurs ecloses dans la nuit du Vietnam: Communism et Dissidence 1954–1956* (Paris, 1991); Boudarel, "Intellectual Dissidence in the 1950s: The Nhân văn–Giai phẩm Affair," adapted from the French by Phi Linh Baneth, *The Vietnam Forum* 13 (1990), 154–74; Kim Ninh, *A World Transformed: The Politics of Culture in Revolutionary Vietnam* (Ann Arbor, 2002); Shawn McHale, "Vietnamese Marxism, Dissent, and the Politics of Postcolonial Memory: Tran Duc Thao, 1946–1993," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 61 (1) (February 2002), 7–31; Nguyễn Võ Thu Hương, *The Ironies of Freedom: Sex, Culture, and Neoliberal Governance in Vietnam* (Seattle, 2008); Peter Zinoman, "Nhân Van-Giai Phẩm and Vietnamese 'Reform Communism' in the 1950s: A Revisionist Interpretation," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 13 (1) (2011), 60–100; Zinoman, *Vietnamese Colonial Republican: The Political Vision of Vũ Trọng Phụng* (Berkeley, 2013).

artistic production. With the end of the war, though, many intellectuals now believed that their sacrifices over the past eight years had earned them a reprieve from this stifling treatment. These men and women were also frustrated by the poor quality of DRVN intellectual production. It was obvious that party control had produced works of propaganda with an expiration date, not works of literature and art with lasting value. Under party guidance, late colonial cultural luminaries such as Xuân Diệu, Nguyên Hồng, and Nguyễn Tuân had been unable to produce anything that matched the quality of their prerevolutionary works – this was despite having witnessed one of the most remarkable and tumultuous periods in Vietnamese history.

In mid-1956, many intellectuals were also upset by the violence and injustices of the recently concluded land reform. When the Geneva Accords' 300-day period of free movement ended in the summer of 1955, Party leaders in Hanoi sealed the borders and ramped up the land reform again. Since the Geneva Accords caused disruptions and delays, the party leaders further streamlined the campaign to ensure completion by July 1956. For most of the North's remaining rural communities, this meant missing the preparatory "rent reduction" phase of the campaign and being thrust directly into the most radical "land reform" phase. This was the phase when the "entire landlord class" was to be "overthrown." During the first half of 1956, more than half of the North's rural population underwent the reform. At the time, the regime's land reform apparatus comprised about 30,000 cadres (men and women, usually of educated background) divided into hundreds of "work teams" and dispersed throughout rural North Vietnam. By mid-1956, most DRVN intellectuals had served as land reform cadres at some point over the last three years and were, therefore, well aware of the campaign's destructive character.[18]

The death toll from the land reform remains one of the Vietnamese Communist Party's tightly kept secrets. Fragments of circumstantial evidence suggest that the three-year campaign probably resulted in the deaths of 20,000–30,000 people. Thousands were shot in dramatic public executions. However, it is possible that an even greater number of the campaign's deaths came from less spectacular circumstances such as the widespread use of torture to elicit false confessions, the brutal conditions of imprisonment, and the deprivation of food resulting from the regime's policy of isolating community members labeled as landlords or traitors. So feared was the experience of

18 Holcombe, "Fallout, 1956," in *Mass Mobilization*, 259–80. On the basic structure of the land reform, see Alex Thai Vo, "Preliminary Comments on Mobilizing the Masses, 1953," *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 33 (1) (November 2016), 983–1018.

public denunciation, trial, and execution that hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Northerners committed suicide after learning that they had been selected as targets of "struggle."

The violence of the land reform combined with another factor in mid-1956 to unsettle DRVN intellectuals in Hanoi. In late February of that year, the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev had delivered his "secret speech" at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). Speaking late into the evening, he described in lurid detail many of Stalin's crimes, vanities, and leadership shortcomings during his long reign as Soviet ruler (1924–53). Khrushchev titled his speech "On the Personality Cult and its Consequences" and stressed three reform initiatives for the communist bloc: "party democracy," "socialist legality," and the "fight against the personality cult." The Soviet leader had copies of the secret speech distributed to CPSU branches throughout the Soviet Union and to representatives of fraternal communist parties, including the VWP. By early June, the US CIA (via Israeli intelligence) had secured a complete copy of the speech. A few days later, it was circulating widely in Western and other noncommunist countries, including South Vietnam.[19]

Like other Communist Party leaders around the world who had promoted Stalin enthusiastically and who had created their own personality cult on the model of Stalin's, Hồ Chí Minh was compromised by the secret speech. He and other top VWP leaders understandably dragged their feet when confronted with the prospect of having to transmit to rank-and-file party members the awkward new messages coming from Moscow. As a result, it was not until April that many DRVN intellectuals learned about the secret speech and Moscow's shocking change in attitude toward the once-venerated Stalin. In hindsight, Hồ Chí Minh's caution was warranted. Khrushchev's denunciation set off a chain of events that would prove severely damaging to the DRVN's four most prominent leaders: Hồ Chí Minh, Trường Chinh, Phạm Văn Đồng, and Võ Nguyên Giáp. In the three years following the speech, two other party leaders, Lê Duẩn and Lê Đức Thọ, would rise to the top of the party and remain the DRVN's most powerful men for the next twenty-five years.

In denouncing Stalin's brutal methods, Khrushchev indirectly criticized many of the same methods employed in the DRVN's land reform campaign. These included the use of torture to extract false confessions, the disregard for legal process, and the arbitrary insistence that enemies and traitors lurked in every corner. Khrushchev's anti-Stalinist narrative emboldened DRVN

19 For information on Khrushchev's speech, see William Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era* (New York, 2003).

intellectuals to voice similar calls for reform in the DRVN. That seemed safe to do since Vietnam's party leaders had always promoted Moscow as the infallible leader of the world revolution. In August 1956, disgruntled DRVN intellectuals in Hanoi received another boost when they learned of Mao's "Hundred Flowers" movement encouraging Chinese intellectuals to publicly criticize the PRC regime.[20]

Convinced that they were acting in accordance with reformist trends in Moscow and Beijing, intellectuals in Hanoi launched a handful of independent publications – that is, print media that circulated without the approval of the party's cultural authorities. The most famous of these short-lived publications were a newspaper titled *Humanity* (*Nhân văn*) and a literary journal titled *Masterworks* (*Giai phẩm*). The movement that emerged during the latter months of 1956 soon came to be known as "*Nhân văn–Giai phẩm*."

The *Nhân văn–Giai phẩm* movement seemed to revolve around a single question: What type of state would the DRVN be? One of *Nhân văn–Giai phẩm*'s most charismatic leaders, a 43-year-old party member named Nguyễn Hữu Đang, called for the DRVN to move away from party dictatorship and establish a law-governed society:

> During the Land Reform, the arrest, imprisonment, and investigation (using brutal torture) of people followed by sentences of imprisonment, execution, and property confiscation were done in an extremely sloppy manner. The same was the case with the policy of putting landlord families (or, in many cases, peasant families that had been incorrectly labeled) under siege to the point of making their innocent children starve to death. These were not entirely the result of poor leadership—they were also the result of not having a proper legal regime.[21]

In the following issue of *Humanity*, Đang published a front-page article titled, "How Do the Vietnamese Constitution of 1946 and the Chinese Constitution Guarantee Democratic Freedoms?" From the DRVN Constitution, he quoted Article 10, which stated that "Vietnamese citizens have the right to freedom of expression, freedom of publication, and freedom of organization and assembly, and freedom of movement inside and outside the country." Đang pointed out that the failure to give citizens these rights promised in the 1946 Constitution could lead to troubles for the DRVN similar to those recently

20 Lại Nguyên Ân and Alec Holcombe, "The Heart and Mind of the Poet Xuân Diệu," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 5 (2) (Summer 2010), 1–90. See also Szalontai, "Political and Economic Crisis."

21 Nguyễn Hữu Đang, "Cần phải chính quy hơn nữa" [We Need to Regularize Even More], *Nhân văn* 4 (November 11, 1956).

experienced by the communist regimes in Poland and Hungary, which had faced large popular protests.[22]

That December, Hồ Chí Minh and the Politburo shut down the *Nhân văn–Giai phẩm* publications and disciplined the movement's participants. Most were forced to write (untrue) self-criticisms and sent to labor in the countryside. Those deemed to be leaders of the movement faced tougher punishments, including police harassment, official stigmatization, and, in some cases, imprisonment. In January of 1960, long after the movement had been crushed, Lê Duẩn (now the most powerful person in the DRVN) put Nguyễn Hữu Đang on trial along with four other people tangentially related to the movement.[23] The motivations behind this macabre publicity stunt remain mysterious. Duẩn may have hoped that the trial would cow DRVN intellectuals suspected of questioning his recent escalation of the war in the South.

## The 1959 Constitution

As we have seen, during the height of the *Nhân văn–Giai phẩm* movement, an important cause for reform-minded DRVN intellectuals was better adherence to the principles and laws of the DRVN Constitution. This may have played a role in convincing Hồ Chí Minh and other party leaders that the time for a new constitution had arrived. Another motivating factor may have been the rival South Vietnamese government's promulgation of a constitution in 1956.

The new DRVN Constitution was to be drafted by a twenty-nine-person Committee to Amend the Constitution (*Ủy ban sửa đổi Hiến pháp*).[24] It was chaired by Hồ Chí Minh and included three other Politburo members – Phạm Văn Đồng, Võ Nguyên Giáp, and Hoàng Văn Hoan (ambassador to China) – along with several other powerful DRVN officials.[25] All twenty-nine committee members had been elected, at least in theory, to the DRVN National Assembly eleven years earlier during the controversial elections of January 1946.[26] Meeting twenty-eight times over a span of two and a half years, the

22 Nguyễn Hữu Đang, "Hiến pháp Việt Nam 1946 và Hiến pháp Trung-Hoa bảo đảm tự do dân chủ thế nào?" [How do the Vietnamese Constitution of 1946 and the Chinese Constitution Guarantee Democratic Freedoms?], *Nhân văn* 5 (November 20, 1957).

23 On Nguyễn Hữu Đang, see Zinoman, "Nhân Van-Giai Phẩm."

24 On the DRVN's 1959 Constitution, see Bernard Fall, "North Viet-Nam's New Draft Constitution," *Pacific Affairs* 32 (2) (June 1959), 178–86; Mark Sidel, *The Constitution of Vietnam: A Contextual Analysis* (Oxford, 2009).

25 Examples include Tôn Đức Thắng, Tố Hữu, Trần Huy Liệu, Xuân Thủy, Nguyễn Tạo, Vũ Đình Hòe, and Hoàng Minh Giám.

26 Trung tâm lưu trữ 3, Fond Quốc hội (QH), "Tiểu ban sửa đổi Hiến pháp 1957" [Subcommittee for Amending the Constitution, 1957), nos. 378, 379, 380.

committee completed the new constitution in late December of 1959. It would serve as the DRVN Constitution throughout the Second Indochina War. The committee's discussions were recorded by notetakers, and these notes provide a window into how the regime's party leaders viewed the relationship between state and citizen.

One important question related to the new constitution was whether it should state that people had the right to demonstrate. According to committee member Hà Văn Tính, "From the perspective of principle, the people have the right to protest and express their aspirations. But, the reality of our regime is that the State and people are of one mind (*nhất trí*)." Tính worried that, if the constitution were to include the right to demonstrate, it would be "disadvantageous because people would not see the unanimity of our regime. Naturally, under our regime, it could happen only rarely (and nobody would want it) that the people would demonstrate against the State."[27]

Responding to this, committee member Nguyễn Tạo stressed the important role that demonstrations played in "opposing the enemy and expressing support for our Government." According to him, "Demonstrations by the people to oppose the enemy must be led by us. If we only think of demonstrations as geared toward opposing our regime, then we consider only one aspect." Continuing, Tạo explained that, because the DRVN regime was a "people's democratic dictatorship, it must recognize the rights of the people. This not only has an impact here in the North but also in the South. Therefore, we need to put the right to protest in the Constitution." As usual, the Politburo member Hoàng Văn Hoan, the highest-ranking Party member in attendance during that meeting, ultimately decided the issue:

> I think that the terms "protest" and "demonstrate," from the past up to today, but especially under the colonial regime, have always carried the meaning of something that is opposed to the feudalists, opposed to the ruling power. Therefore, people still tend to have that old view of the terms. If we hold the view that protests and demonstrations are meant to allow the people to express their ideas, not just to oppose but even to support, then it does no harm to put it in the Constitution. In fact, it helps to show that our regime is very strong, that it carries out to the highest level the people's democratic freedoms, that it enjoys the faith of the people. If there are reactionaries who exploit that right to demonstrate, we can mobilize the forces of the people and crush those protesters. With respect to the South, putting it in the Constitution also is advantageous. All in all, I think we need to put it in the Constitution.[28]

27 Ibid., Meeting 17, December 26, 1957, 9–10.
28 Ibid., 10–11.

The Committee to Amend the Constitution did, after some discussion, concede that the new constitution needed to guarantee the right of people to demonstrate. However, the reasoning behind this had nothing to do with guaranteeing the democratic freedoms of DRVN citizens. The reasoning was based entirely on the party leadership's political agenda, namely the need to support Southern demonstrations against the Ngô Đình Diệm regime and to stage among the Northern population mass demonstrations in support of the party's political causes. As the comments by Nguyễn Tạo reveal, any sort of popular demonstration in the North not stemming from party initiative and not under party control was unacceptable. As for a popular protest aimed at the DRVN regime, the comments from the Politburo member Hoàng Văn Hoan ("crush those protestors") make clear that the new constitution's guarantee of democratic freedoms ("to the highest level") would in fact offer no protection whatsoever.

## Agricultural Collectivization: 1958–60

The Constitution Committee's nervousness about popular protest may have been partly inspired by the imminent prospect of imposing a system of collectivized agriculture on the Northern countryside.[29] This was the centerpiece of the party's plan to nationalize all significant economic activity in the DRVN, including fishing, mining, forestry, factory production, media production, and foreign trade. Agricultural collectivization had been a dream of the DRVN's party leaders since the 1930s. In those days, before communist revolutionaries had seized power and carried out a war, collectivization probably appealed because it seemed morally superior and more modern than the small-farmer system. Also, since the 1930s, collectivized agriculture had been the rural economic system of the Soviet Union, which held a mythic position in the minds of many Vietnamese communists.[30] In 1957, those original, idealistic motivations for collectivization were surely supplemented by two practical ones that stemmed from the experiences of the French Indochina War.

29 On agricultural collectivization in the DRVN, see Benedict Kirkvliet, *The Power of Everyday Politics: How Vietnamese Peasants Transformed National Politics* (Ithaca, 2005); Chad Raymond, "'No Responsibility and No Rice': The Rise and Fall of Agricultural Collectivization in Vietnam, *Agricultural History* 82 (1) (Winter, 2008); Andrew Vickerman, *The Fate of the Peasantry: Premature "Transition to Socialism" in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam* (New Haven, 1986); Hoang Van Chi, "Collectivization and Rice Production," *The China Quarterly* 9 (March 1962), 94–104.

30 Tuong Vu, *Vietnam's Communist Revolution: The Power and Limits of Ideology* (Cambridge, 2017).

First, the DRVN regime's existence still depended on extracting a huge material contribution from an extremely unproductive rural economy. The difficulty of this task had tormented party leaders throughout the French Indochina War, sometimes jeopardizing the military effort. The reality was that most peasants, during prolonged periods of hardship, would not voluntarily boost production just to serve the war effort or build socialism. The party had redistributed land in many of the provinces and districts it controlled throughout the eight years of war. But this had done nothing to stem the decline in production. Thus, there was no practical basis on which to conclude that land reform would solve this problem of productivity. Collectivization, as the next stage in the Marxist–Leninist model of economic transformation, was the only remaining card to be played.

Second, the regime still had no means of earning the money needed to fund its ambitious economic and political goals: industrialization of the economy and military defeat of the rival regime in Saigon. Therefore, the DRVN remained heavily dependent on communist bloc aid. Because that aid could only be demanded in the name of proletarian internationalism, the DRVN leaders needed to project an image of themselves as enthusiastic students of the Soviet Union and China. This meant dutifully following in Moscow's and Beijing's footsteps. To not undergo collectivization would have been to challenge the wisdom of Soviet and Chinese leaders and to question the correctness of the Soviet system.[31]

In December 1957, the Politburo explained that "Consolidating the North and gradually constructing socialism" was one of the regime's three essential tasks. The meaning of "gradually" was not explained. At the end of 1955, though, the DRVN leaders had invested in six "large" and ten "small" collective farms – a sign that the move to collectivized agriculture was likely to be rapid, not gradual. These test collective farms were supposed to be carefully nurtured and generously supported so that they would succeed and generate popular excitement about collectivization. In March 1957, party leaders held a conference devoted to assessing the results of these sixteen collective farms. In typical fashion, the leaders of the conference produced a lengthy report (forty pages), which was probably read to attendees and sent to various party officials. The report reveals what the DRVN's leaders had learned about collective farming in Vietnam before pushing forward aggressively with the policy in late 1958.[32]

31 On the issue of Soviet and Chinese aid, see Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam*; Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*; Xiaobing Li, *Building Ho's Army: Chinese Military Assistance to North Vietnam* (Lexington, KY, 2019).

32 Trung Tâm Lưu Trữ 3, "Tập tài liệu về Hội nghị tổng kết công tác Nông trường Quốc doanh năm 1956 do Sở Quốc doanh Nông nghiệp tổ chức 15/3/57" [Documents

The ministry of agriculture had invested 60 percent of its development budget into these sixteen collective farms, which employed a total of 8,500 "cadres and workers." And yet, after a year of operation, despite being supplied with the latest Soviet-bloc agricultural equipment, fourteen of the sixteen farms were operating at a loss. The most discouraging news involved the production of rice, the staple of the North Vietnamese diet. The writer of the report calculated that inefficiencies in rice production accounted for over half the total debt accumulated by the sixteen farms. "Generally speaking, the collective farm work generated many losses for the Nation."

The report writer also discussed the effect of the collective farms on their workers and on residents of the surrounding area. Locals found the farms intriguing. However, the report acknowledged that "we have not yet served as a model for the people in our organization of production and in our farming technique." In some places, "our sloppy way of working has generated concern among our compatriots, who find our mistakes and weaknesses painful (for example, the waste of chemical fertilizer at the Thạch Ngọc farm)."

These were signs of the troubles that would plague the productivity of these and subsequent DRVN collective farms for the next thirty years. Though the report described in exhaustive detail the waste that accompanied the misuse and abuse of expensive farm equipment and supplies, it still concluded that the "biggest waste was in manpower." According to the report, "serious waste and corruption" characterized the work regimen of the farms:

> Extremely common is wasted work, with people arriving late and leaving early. And we have used 3 million days' worth of pay on labor mobilized from people outside the collective farm. On an ordinary work day, losing only one hour of work would be unusually little. Therefore, the amount of wasted work amounts to 380,000 work days, the equivalent of nearly 450 million Vietnamese *đồng*. Also, the number of people in the farm who do not work is high, perhaps as much as 1,200 people during the last three months of the year. The amount of waste from this is over 100 million Vietnamese *dong* during this three-month period.[33]

The writer of the report expressed grave concern about the extensive use of "mobilized manpower" (*nhân lực huy động*), which referred to non-farm members who lived in the surrounding area. In parentheses next to the term "mobilized manpower," the report writer had typed the French word "CORVÉE."

from the Summing-up Meeting on Work of National Collective Farms during 1956, Organized by the National Collective Farm Department on March 15, 1957], *Fond Nông Lâm*, no. 358.

33 Ibid.

(In the Vietnamese context, "corvée" usually referred to the unpaid labor that the French colonial state had required of Vietnamese for various construction projects.) The extensive use of outside labor showed that the farms were not self-sufficient, despite having been abundantly supplied. The outside laborers "did not just help the collective farm with a particular job for one day but instead worked for the farm on a daily basis."

Despite the worrying results of the ministry's experiment, Lê Duẩn and the Politburo decided to push forward with collectivization in December 1958. Uneasy about the optics of imposing this radical transformation on their rural population, party leaders depicted coercion from above as a democratic response to voices from below. Thus, a directive from the VWP Secretariat stated that the "masses in many places are demanding that they be organized into agricultural collectives" and that the party had to "give special attention to the consolidation and development of the collectivization movement in order to satisfy the demands of the masses …"[34] By the end of 1960, the party had placed roughly 85 percent of the DRVN's rural population into thousands of collective farms.

How would peasants gain access to the food produced by the collective farm? After the DRVN state had taken its required amount, the farm's remaining produce was distributed among members according to the principle of "work days." Collective farm managers calculated a work day by assigning "points" to the different tasks carried out on the farm. Ten points equaled a work day. Each task, such as plowing, planting, and harvesting the collective crop, had criteria for measuring its completeness. If the manager of the collective farm determined that a member had completed a task according to standard, the member would receive a predetermined number of points. Indeed, the collective farm officials held all the power in a village. They allotted themselves work points for attending meetings, studying, or visiting fields. According to a historian of collectivization:

> Laboring members of the collective lost the right to ownership and independence in production. Meanwhile, the power of cadres who held official positions in the collective was tremendous. They determined how many "work points" members earned and decided how each grain of rice would be divided among the community. Without the signature of a local official, regular members of the collective and their children could not enter the party, mass organizations, schools, or educational institutions. Without the collective farm official's signature, members could not leave the village to carry

34 Holcombe, "Re-Stalinization and Collectivization, 1957–1960," in *Mass Mobilization*, 281–97.

> out work. And this was a weakness of these farms that cadres of poor character used to pressure and exploit the people.[35]

During the period from 1961 to 1965, DRVN collective farms opened up about 200,000 hectares of new land, but overall agricultural productivity still fell due to plummeting efficiency. The costs of production began to rise, and returns on state investments steadily declined. According to statistics gathered by one scholar, the average amount of rice distributed each month to families on collective farms in 1961 was twenty-four kilograms. By 1964, that amount had fallen to fourteen kilograms.[36] Mobilization for war played a role but cannot explain the sheer magnitude of the drop.

Despite the collapse of the DRVN agricultural sector, Lê Duẩn refused to abandon collectivization. A directive released by the Party Secretariat in February 1960 suggests that officials were well aware of the resentments generated by the new policies:

> The process of carrying out a socialist revolution and building socialism is, at the same time, a complicated, tense, and decisive process of class warfare. We want to protect our revolutionary accomplishments and guarantee the effectiveness of our socialist reform and socialist construction. Therefore, the revolutionary regime led by the working class absolutely must severely repress any action of resistance carried out by counterrevolutionary forces. That is an essential responsibility of any country's working class carrying out a revolution.[37]

Ideology was not the only motivation behind the push to collectivize. Pride was also a factor. The party leaders had staked their reputations on the superiority of the socialist system. To acknowledge that the collectivized economy was a failure was to acknowledge that three decades of revolutionary activism, often expressed in a tone of shrill contempt for alternative views, had been misguided. Of course, officials were also motivated by the desperate need to secure Soviet and Chinese support and especially by the leverage that these collective farms afforded the DRVN state over the rural population. The virtual elimination of private property in the countryside weakened the position of the rural masses vis-à-vis the state, making resistance to government policies (such as the recruitment of soldiers) more difficult.

35 Thái Duy, "Từ 'khoán' đến 'Hộ nông dân tự chủ'" [From Contract to Family Ownership], *Đổi mới ở Việt Nam: Nhớ lại và suy ngẫm* [New Change in Vietnam: Remembering and Considering] (Ho Chi Minh City, 2008), 291.

36 Ibid., 292.

37 Holcombe, *Mass Mobilization*, 189.

## Conclusion

Looking at the period from 1954 to 1963, we can discern three major stages in DRVN state construction. The first was the land reform carried out from 1953 to 1956. It targeted the most influential members of rural communities, including thousands of loyal party members, and paved the way for collectivization. The second phase occurred primarily from 1956 to 1957 and targeted the DRVN intellectual community. Those of their ranks who challenged the party to reform were suppressed – those who remained compliant and quiet were rewarded with stable professional positions, often regardless of talent. The third phase was the collectivization of agriculture (and the nationalization of the economy), carried out from 1958 to 1960. This removed the means of production (land) from the rural population's hands and made peasants dependent on the state for survival.

It could be argued that a new phase in state construction began in late 1963, after Lê Duẩn decided to commit the DRVN to a more aggressive, all-out military strategy in the South. At that time, he and his supporters attacked and purged high-ranking party members suspected of questioning the new strategy. Thus began the VWP's "Anti-Party Affair," which extended into 1964 and would be reactivated in 1967 and 1968. In aiming these waves of repression at the upper ranks of the party (even the legendary general, Võ Nguyên Giáp, was suppressed into quiet passivity), Lê Duẩn completed the work begun by Hồ Chí Minh and his lieutenants back in 1945. The DRVN state, from bottom to top, had been molded into a compliant instrument of the party leader's power.[38]

The discussion presented here describes only part of the story of state construction in the DRVN during 1954–63. Many new (or substantially overhauled) state institutions of control profoundly affected the everyday lives of North Vietnamese citizens. Notable examples include the personal dossier system (*lý lịch*), the Party Committee system (*Đảng đoàn*), the family register system (*hộ khẩu*), the court system, and the education system. Other instruments of social control were the ministry of public security and the Hồ Chí

38 On the Anti-Party Affair, see Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*; Sophie Quinn-Judge, "The Ideological Debate in the DRV and the Significance of the Anti-Party Affair, 1967–1968," *Cold War History* 5 (4) (November 2005), 479–500; Martin Grossheim, "Revisionism in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam: New Evidence from the East German Archives," *Cold War History* 5 (4) (2005), 451–77; Grossheim, "The Lao Động Party, Culture and the Campaign against 'Modern Revisionism': The Democratic Republic of Vietnam Before the Second Indochina War," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 8 (1) (Winter 2013), 80–129.

Minh personality cult, which persisted despite Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin and his cult.[39]

In his classic three-volume study of Marxism's origins, development, and breakdown, Leszek Kolakowski includes multiple discussions of totalitarianism. One of his clearest definitions of the concept appears in a chapter that covers "The Beginnings of Russian Marxism":

> [Totalitarianism refers to] the principle that the whole life of society, especially economic and cultural activity, must not only be supervised by the state but must be absolutely subordinated to its needs … It follows from this principle that the state is the only legitimate source of any social initiative, and that any organization or crystallization of social life that is not imposed by the state is contrary to its needs and interests. It also follows that the citizen is the property of the state, and that all his acts are either directed by the state or are a challenge to its authority.[40]

Kolakowski accurately describes the mindset of the DRVN leaders and the spirit behind the political and economic system that they constructed in North Vietnam in the decade after Geneva.[41] Of course, they never achieved *total* control over society – no state has ever succeeded in eradicating the spaces in which individual initiative endures. But the party leaders, often invoking Marxist–Leninist theory as their justification, worked hard to minimize those spaces so that most of the North Vietnamese population could be mobilized for war indefinitely.

39 Olga Dror, "Establishing Hồ Chí Minh's Cult: Vietnamese Traditions and Their Transformation," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 75 (2) (May 2016), 433–66.
40 Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, P. S. Falla (trans.) (New York, 2005), 602.
41 On the totalitarian nature of the DRVN, see Olga Dror, *Making Two Vietnams: War and Youth Identities, 1965–1975* (Cambridge, 2018).