LAND REFORM
IN
NORTH VIETNAM
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in

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by

Christine Pelzer White

June 1970

Country Papers represent the views of their authors and are not generally intended as statements of policy of either A.I.D. or the author's parent institution.

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Note: The Country Paper by Christine White is followed by one of her principal references, the 1959 article by J. Price Gittinger, "Communist Land Policy in North Viet Nam", which appeared in the Far Eastern Survey in August of that year.
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North Vietnam superimposed on a map of French Indo-China.
I. Summary.

Tonkin and the northern part of Annam, the area which was to become North Vietnam, were the most densely populated portions of former French Indochina. This was traditionally a rice deficit area, whereas the more sparsely settled Mekong Delta was a rice surplus area. When Vietnam was divided in 1954, two economically complementary regions were split: the industrial resources to the North (especially high-grade anthracite coal) and the agricultural resources to the South.

North Vietnam's major agricultural problem is overpopulation of a relatively small fertile area. The mountain regions, with only 5% of the nation's arable land, occupy 2/3 of the territory. 80% of the population lives in the densely populated rice-growing deltas, the most important of which is the Red River delta, which contains 74% of the arable land and 75% of the population. Official DRV figures issued in 1960 give a clear picture of the seriousness of the problem.

Table 1. Land availability in North Vietnam. 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Net area of cultivated land*</td>
<td>.11 hectares per person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.154 hectares per person in rural labor force +</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gross area of cultivated land</td>
<td>.154 hectares per person in the rural labor force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultivable area</td>
<td>12.3% of total area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area cultivated in 1958</td>
<td>11.2% of total area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>density per square kilometer#</td>
<td>72 persons in 1939</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>density in the Red River delta</td>
<td>100 persons in 1960</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual rate of population growth, 1957-1960</td>
<td>700 persons per square kilometer in 1960 (ranging from 400 to 1000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* 40% of the cultivated land is double cropped, therefore 1 hectare net=1.4 hectares gross.
+ rural population=90.4% of the total population
agricultural population=80% of the total population
active population from 16 to 55 years of age=47% of the total population
total population=16 million inhabitants.
# 16 million inhabitants for 159,000 square kilometers in 1960
North Vietnam has one of the highest rates of population growth and lowest area of cultivable land per inhabitant in the world.  

North Vietnam has aimed at raising the standard of living of the agricultural population and at the same time obtaining a surplus from the agricultural sector in order to develop industry. The leading French scholar on Indochinese agriculture, Pierre Gourou, thought that even raising the standard of living of the Tonkinese peasant was impossible. Although the DRV has achieved impressive results in improving the quality of life in the villages, especially in health and education, the basic problem remains. Basic foodstuffs have been rationed since 1957, indicating that the agricultural sector produces barely enough to cover the basic needs of the population, let alone provide extra capital for industrial development.

As a result of great efforts in expanding crop area, crop diversification, irrigation, increased use of fertilizer, and agricultural education the DRV claims to have achieved a 5% continuing annual increase in agricultural production. Even if this claim, which may be high, is correct, this rate of growth is mostly taken up with the 3.4% annual population growth.

Agricultural output in North Vietnam in terms of average yield per hectare is still very low. According to a study by a North Vietnamese author, in 1965 average yield was 18.94 quintals per hectare, compared with 20.5 as the world average, 44.4 in the U.S. and 52.4 in Japan. There is thus great room for improvement of production on presently cultivated land.

Labor productivity is also very low. The author cited above stated that in North Vietnam the labor necessary for production of rice is 100-120 hours per 100 kilogram, compared with 44.4 in Japan, 34 in Columbia, 14 in Chile and 1.3 in the U.S. The low productivity of labor is due to the fact that 90% of agricultural work is done by hand. Because of the great population density, raising the productivity of labor without industrialization would create a great problem of unemployment.
This brief sketch gives an idea of the most salient problems of agriculture in North Vietnam. The major focus of this paper, however, will be the structure of land ownership over time.

According to the best available survey of Vietnamese history from its prehistoric origins to the contemporary period, Le Thanh Khoi's *Le Viet Nam, Histoire et Civilisation*, Vietnamese history has been characterized by cycles of concentration and dispersion of land ownership. Since Vietnam developed, under Chinese tutelage, into a political system ruled by an emperor and based on an economy of wet-rice agriculture, there was a continuing conflict between the desire of the state to maintain equality of land ownership, for the sake of social order and good tax collection, and the tendency of local notables to amass large properties. Generally, a new, strong dynasty would enact land reform and increase the amount of land designated as inalienable communal land. As the dynasty weakened, local nobles would become large landowners.

Unlike previous rulers, the French did not have a policy of attempting to preserve communal lands and prevent large holdings. On the contrary, they granted large tracts of agricultural land to French and Vietnamese as private property, and were uninterested or unable to stop a growing concentration of land ownership.

Because of the concentration of land ownership, great tax burden on the peasantry, monetization of the economy, and the reliance of the French on frequently corrupt Vietnamese intermediaries, the conditions of the Tonkinese peasantry worsened under French rule. Of course, this is not to say that poverty and oppression of the peasants by local despots and mandarins did not exist in Vietnam before the French arrived; rather, these were not problems that the French were interested in solving, and French policies, such as heavy taxation of the peasantry, made a bad situation worse.

North Vietnamese agricultural policy as regards land ownership has undergone two stages.

1. Land reform. (1953-1956) The object of land reform was to eliminate landlord
economic and political control in the countryside and give land to the tiller. The expropriation of landlords was badly executed and characterized by what the North Vietnamese termed "leftist mistakes", which the regime tried to correct in the "rectification of errors" campaign of 1956-1957. Despite the errors, the government considers that land reform was basically successful; the working peasants got the land, and landlords' social and political influence in the villages was eliminated.

2. Cooperativization. Given the minute size of the holdings, restratification of the size of holdings and the re-emergence of a class of landless peasants was just a matter of time. North Vietnamese leaders considered this to be an inevitable development in the system of private land ownership. In 1958 the government decided to reject the "capitalist road" of private land ownership even as a temporary measure for achieving high agricultural productivity at the cost of their social ideals, and chose the "socialist road" by abolishing private ownership through the creation of cooperatives.

North Vietnamese agrarian reform has generally followed the Chinese model. Cooperativization passed through the phases of Mutual Aid Teams, lower-level Agricultural Producers' Cooperatives, and higher-level Agricultural Producers' Cooperatives familiar to students of Chinese agricultural policy. However, apparently profiting from China's mistakes, North Vietnam did not try to create Communes. Cooperatives are generally the size of a village.

Since independence, then, North Vietnam has had not one but two land reforms. The first abolished what the North Vietnamese call the feudal system of landlord control and instituted private peasant land ownership; the second abolished "capitalist" private land ownership and instituted collective ownership of land by the cooperative (not the state). Hence a modification of the Country Paper outline has been necessary. Sections III and IV treat land reform and its effects, and sections V and VI treat Cooperativization and its effects.
II. Pre-Reform Period.

II.A. Introduction: Economic and Political Background.

The area that is now North Vietnam became a part of the French Empire in 1884. Joseph Buttinger's study, Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled presents the best survey available in English of the French period, and it presents a devastating picture of French colonial policy.¹ Lest it be thought that this represents a particularly anti-French bias, it should be noted that many leading French studies of Indochina contain strong criticism of colonial policy there, and indeed, Buttinger's study relies heavily on French sources.

It seems likely that the fact that French colonial policy was frequently short-sighted and counter-productive was due in large part to the singular weakness of the Third Republic. A major index of the lack of metropolitan control of the colony was the rapid turnover in Governor-Generals. This was both because of changes of government in France and because several governors who offended powerful vested interests in the colony were driven out in short order by political pressure. As Buttinger's account indicates, it was a colony run by local French administrators and colonists for themselves, with little control from France.

According to Buttinger, the man who did most to determine the future course of French colonialism was Paul Doumer, Governor-General 1897-1902. He built up the huge French bureaucracy, which was to become, proportionally to the native population, the largest body of non-native administrators of any Asian colony. He believed that the building of roads and railroads would automatically bring economic development and prosperity to Indochina. In order to finance his very expensive railroad schemes and his other grandiose public works he raised the head tax and instituted an oppressive indirect tax in the form of government-controlled monopolies of the purchase and distribution of salt, liquor and opium.² These government-controlled monopolies were to become a major Vietnamese grievance and nationalist issue, for the price of salt went way up, and small native industries such as fish processing were harmed, and a system of fixed quotas of consumption (or at least purchase) of opium and liquor per village developed. The railroad that the monopolies and heavy taxes were instituted to finance turned out to be a
financial fiasco for everyone but the construction companies involved. The Saigon-Hanoi railroad, for example, duplicated the cheaper sea route, and was later devaluated by the construction, also along the coast, of Vietnam's largest and longest highway. As Buttinger notes,

This road, as well as the railroad, did not primarily serve the economically most developed and densely populated regions of Vietnam, but ran for hundreds of miles through country that was almost empty.

Although the peasants had to pay for them and build them, the expensive French roads and railroads were of no benefit to the native economy.4

The exploitation of the peasantry to pay for the wages of a swollen bureaucracy and badly planned public works meant that, unlike most other Asian colonies or semi-colonies, Indochinese peasants were too poor to become a market for European manufactured goods. In India and Indonesia, for example, handicrafts all but died out during the colonial period due to the competition of better quality, cheap manufactured goods. The handicraft industry survived in Indochina because of the exceptional intensive character of French colonial exploitation, which precluded any form of economic development that might have raised the purchasing power of the native population.5

The French period was characterized by a continuing growth of landlordism and increasing pauperization of the peasants. This was due partly to the tax policies mentioned above. Many peasants had to borrow money in order to pay their taxes, and, unable to pay back the principal and high interest, lost their land to the moneylenders.

A second reason for the increase of landlords on the one hand and landless or debt-ridden peasants on the other was French land policies. Vietnamese law, before the arrival of the French, was inimical to the accumulation of private property. According to imperial law, all land left fallow was to return to the public domain. A code of 1808 "forbid civil servants and rich people to benefit from the poverty or dispersion of inhabitants of a village to usurp land and ricefields through buying them." Unlike the traditional Vietnamese law, French policies and law favored development of large scale private property. Large private concessions were granted
to French and Vietnamese individuals and companies, and all constituted property was considered inviolable.

The following case illustrates the difference between Vietnamese and French land policies. According to a law of the reign of Minh Mang in 1824, the lands of abandoned villages were to be joined to those of neighboring villages, to be cultivated by tax-paying villagers. If the former owners returned, their lands were to be returned to them, with the exception of formerly uncultivated land which the new owners had opened up. However, as the French established control of Tonkin, very different policies were instituted. On the edge of the delta and especially in Bac Giang province, in zones temporarily abandoned because of fighting, vast concessions were granted to private individuals. After 1900, when the peasants, ex-owners of the land, returned, they were obliged to pay the concessionary heavy rents. The concessionaries did nothing to increase production; asked why not, one replied "that would be too much trouble".

Bernard Fall has pointed out that it was a serious mistake in French agricultural policy to allow village-owned land, the traditional social insurance of poor and landless peasants, to fall into the hands of speculators and dishonest village chiefs. The traditional Vietnamese village owned a considerable amount of land which it distributed periodically to landless and land-poor villagers. During French rule, the power of village notables (as village leaders were called) came to be based more on their connections with, and services for, higher administrative levels than the support of their fellow villagers. Whereas previously village leaders had probably practiced favoritism in the distribution of communal land, under French rule many found it possible to ignore tradition and the opinion of fellow villagers entirely, and illegally sell village lands or appropriate it for their own use.

In sum, the French undermined the traditional socio-economy system of the Tonkin delta without making any significant attempt to modernize the agricultural economy. Although they introduced a separate modern agricultural sector in the form of plantations,
they exploited the traditional agricultural sector rather than developing it.

On the basis of an extensive survey carried out in 1931, the French Inspector General of Agriculture, Yves Henry, noted the grave social danger inherent in the fact that a very large rural proletariat had developed in the North of Vietnam made up of small and very small landowners, renters, sharecroppers, and agricultural workers with little or no land. The first indication of the full revolutionary potential of the situation had been in 1930, when there was a communist-led peasant uprising centered in two provinces in Northern Annam: Nghe An and Ha Tinh. For a period of almost a year, mandarins, notables and French colonial officials were driven from the countryside of large areas of the two provinces. Government buildings were destroyed, tax and cadastral records burned and a number of mandarins and notables killed.

There had been several nationalist revolts in the period since French conquest, but the founding of the Indochinese Communist Party in 1930 and the Nghe-Tinh Soviets in 1930-1931 marked the fusing of the elite-based nationalist movement with peasant social grievances. The French succeeded in reconquering the area militarily by bombing and carrying out search and destroy missions in rebel villages. Some token reforms were made by the colonial government, but none that affected the peasants' grievances. In sum, the revolutionary potential of the situation was only checked by French military might and administrative control. This control was broken by World War II. In the years that followed the declaration of independence in 1945, the Communist Party was able to consolidate its position as the vanguard of the movement for national liberation and social change, gaining the support of both the peasant masses and a large percentage of the intelligencia in Tonkin and Annam. In Cochinchina, however, they had powerful rival socio-religious movements among the peasantry to contend with (the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao sects), as well as a significant class of wealthy Vietnamese landlords and bourgeoisie who had profited from French rule and opposed social change.
II. B. Land Tenure Structure

1. Characteristics

A report in 1958 issued by the North Vietnamese government gave the following statistics for land ownership in 1945 and 1953. (Between 1945 and 1953 the Vietminh carried out a partial reform, redistributing land owned by French and pro-French Vietnamese.) It can be assumed that the average size of holdings per individual

Table 2. Percentage of farms and lands owned by the working peasant class in the 16 provinces of North Vietnam.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Before the Revolution of August 1945</th>
<th>In 1953, before the radical reform</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% of farms</td>
<td>% of farm land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle peasants</td>
<td>32.9%</td>
<td>30.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor peasants</td>
<td>35.4%</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agricultural workers</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

in each class in this table are the same as in another table issued by a North Vietnamese source the same year, 1958: middle peasant: .0999 hectares per mouth to feed (not per owner), and .0343 hectares per mouth to feed for poor peasants. There is no indication of what percentage of the rural population these "working peasants" constituted, except that the last category, landless agricultural workers, were 61.5% of the peasants.

The best and most recent studies of land tenure structure in North Vietnam in the French period were published in the 1930s: Yves Henry, Economie Agricole de l'Indochine (1932) and Pierre Gourou's The Peasants of the Tonkin Delta (first published 1936). Henry's study is massive and detailed, and is the result of a major inquiry conducted by the Agriculture department of French Indochina, which Henry headed. Gourou has pointed out the limitations of this study: the category of rural proletarians who do not own a single square meter of land should not have been overlooked. Nothing is said of the percentage of lands belonging to each category, which is important, for a region in which small landowners are numerous might well not be a region of small holdings, if
the small landowners hold only a small portion of the land. Henry's study
stresses the fact that in Tonkin, 91.48% of landowners are smallholders with
0 to 1.8 hectares. In the portion of Annam now included in the territory of
North Vietnam, 93.8% of landowners own from 0 to 2.5 hectares, according to
Henry. However, the structure looks rather different considered from the point
of view of the area of total cultivated land controlled by each category. According
to figures given by Gourou (which differ only slightly from those of Henry given
above), in Tonkin small owners with 0 to 1.8 hectares constitute 90% of the
owners but own only 36.6% of the cultivated area. The remaining 10% of landowners
own 43.2% of the cultivated land. The remaining 20% of the land being the
communal land. Furthermore, large landowners were certainly more numerous
than these calculations based on official statistics show. Henry admits
"in adding up figures by villages, perhaps we have counted the same landholders
many times if he owns property in many villages..." Some large holders register
their land in the name of their wives." Gourou also notes that large property
owners tend to hide their wealth, particularly when they are mandarins in office
or former mandarins, which frequently is the case, for they can be too easily
accused of having taken advantage of their administrative position to enrich
themselves. Finally, in many cases the land belongs to the small holder in
name only: it is actually controlled by the moneylender, or has been sold to
a creditor but remains on the cadaster as belonging to the former owner.

A study by Jean Goudal for the International Labour Office (1938) stressed
the importance of manual labor and social relations in rural class distinctions.
Smallholders "give their services to each other by the day in return for payment
in kind" - ie service in return: a mutual aid system. Larger owners (7-18
hectares) are "a social group which loses caste if it performs manual work." This
distinction by labor rather than by size of property alone is similar to
the classification used by the North Vietnamese land reform.
Table 3. Number of landlords and working landowning peasants in North Vietnam in 1931.\(^\text{22}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>owner-operators</th>
<th>landlords farming with tenants or sharecroppers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tonkin</td>
<td>952,485</td>
<td>12,005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 provinces of North Annam now in DRV</td>
<td>341,267</td>
<td>23,204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>total</td>
<td>1,293,752</td>
<td>35,209</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. should be considered as giving a minimal number of the number of landlords; the real number was unknown, but significantly larger.

Land management arrangement: Whatever the extent of the property, the method of farming was the same: small-scale exploitation carried on by the cultivator himself with the help of his family. Absentee landlords used intermediaries, who were able to squeeze enough profit out of their position to become usurers themselves. These hated figures were classified as "assimilated to landowners" in the land reform campaign.\(^\text{24}\)

Sharecropping and land rent: According to Henry's study, renting was most frequent in Tonkin in 1931. The landowner paid land tax, but tenants had to furnish all equipment. Rent was fixed in advance, in cash or kind, and there was usually a contract, which did not include the gifts and corvee labor which the tenant was also expected to provide the landowner. In Annam, sharecropping was preferred, especially if the landowner could supervise the harvest. Since land rent was the preferred system of absentee landlords, this indicates a lower degree of absenteeism. In both regions, a contract of share-cropping was often drawn up, but if the landowner and sharecropper live in the same village and were in some way related there was no written contract. Fixed rent was particularly preferred by landlords in regions subject to natural disasters, such as drought and flood. According to Gourou, cash rent was payable in advance; rent in kind varied from a third to a half of a normal harvest, but did not vary with the harvest. In the event of a bad harvest, the farmer still had to turn over the agreed quantity. Gourou figured the net profit in a normal year to be a maximum
of 1,100 kg of paddy. Figured at its cash value, this did not adequately remunerate the toil of the farmer and his family, even at the local rate for labor, and for a family of 5 members, 1,100 kg of paddy was barely sufficient to supply its provisioning in rice. According to both Gourou and Henry, the most common rate in sharecropping was 1/2 the crop to the landlord.

2. Changes in Land tenure structure

The system described above is one which developed primarily during the period of French rule. For example, Henry noted that fixed rent tenancy, the preferred system of absentee landlords, had formerly been very rare, but was spreading little by little. According to the leading study of the economy of Indochina, "In Tonkin large estates have come into existence since the French occupation and as a result many small owners have become new tenant farmers." Henry noted that communal lands were being taken over by large property owners. As Bernard Fall has pointed out, it was one of the gravest errors in French agricultural policy to allow communal land, the traditional social insurance, to fall into the hands of speculators and dishonest village chiefs; the French also pursued a blind policy of granting large concessions.

During the Nghe-Tinh uprising in 1930-31 land was confiscated from landlords and redistributed in some areas, but when the French reestablished control, so did the landlords.

III C. Land Resource Information

1. Land availability See table 1, section I. Based on figures used by Gourou, who estimates the rural labor force at 55% of the rural population, the land/man ratio in 1931 in Tonkin was 0.3 hectare per working peasant. At that time the Tonkin delta was one of the most intensively cultivated areas in the world. Gourou estimated that 80% of the land there was under cultivation, and the rest either taken up by inalterable needs (houses, roads, dikes, etc.), or unsuitable for cultivation. Peasants would even plant river beds during the dry season, and in the shallow water of rivers.
The only land available for possible colonization was (and is) in the mountain areas. French-sponsored attempts at colonization were failures, mainly because of the distance from densely populated areas and the fact that the highlands are malaria-infested.

2. Classification. The soils of the delta as a whole are only mediocre in fertility except along the Red River and at the river mouths, where they are very rich (and where there is the greatest population density). Humus is not abundant and the soils are generally very poor in lime. The soils have sufficient nitrogen, but because of the lack of lime it is not in assimilable form. Many of the rice fields in Annam are very poor, and the climate is more irregular than Tonkin.

Other than fertility, the major factor influencing land value is whether it is on high, middle or low ground, as high fields are subject to drought in the dry season, low fields to waterlogging in the wet season, and middle ground best for double cropping.

According to Gourou, the soils of the Tonkin Delta are known fairly well, thanks to the work of L'Institut des Recherches Agronomiques.

3. Identification and Titling.

In the traditional Vietnamese system, the emperor was owner of all the land. He transferred possession of it to those who cultivate it and pay the land tax. The village community was a very strong corporate body, owning part of the land constituting its territory. Henry's survey showed that in some provinces, half of the cultivated area was communally owned. The average for Annam was 25%, for Tonkin 20%.

Traditionally, the right to land was based on an entry in the village land register used for tax purposes. But the value of this system for proving rights of ownership was destroyed by negligence of authorities in keeping up the register or the lack of registers. The result was innumerable lawsuits. After 1925 the
French started a cadastral survey. However, it is not known to what extent land reform proceedings relied on cadastral records: presumably they were used if available, but land reform in no way depended on them.

**Rural Production and Productivity.**

No breakdown available by tenure groups and size of farms, but since large properties were broken down and farmed like small properties, the difference might not have been significant. Yield was low: in 1928, the yield per hectare was 12 quintal in Indochina, compared with 15 in Java, 18 in Siam and 34 in Japan. Gourou was of the opinion that the official estimate was low, due to under-reporting to evade taxes: his estimate for the early 30s was 14 quintals, which is still lower than all the comparable figures given above. Rice production varied considerably from year to year, chiefly because of irregular rainfall.

The Tonkin delta was not self-sufficient in rice except at a very low per capita consumption (estimated by Goudal at 136 kilograms). Secondary products, such as tubers and corn, allowed the population to subsist, but still most of the population could only eat two meals a day for most of the year, this being reduced to a meal of tubers or rice gruel and grass in the periodic shortage before the harvest. Despite this, when the price of rice was high, Tonkin exported:

Before the depression which begins in 1930 in Tonkin, the Delta exported an average of 180,000 tons of paddy processed into rice. But this quantity was in no way a surplus: the Chinese merchants could export it because the Tonkinese peasants are ready to sell their paddy as soon as the harvest is over, keeping for their own consumption only insufficient quantities.

When commodity prices fell, Tonkin peasants ate better.

There was a serious lack of protein. The main sources were little fish, shrimps and crabs. Because of this lack, people ate rats, insects, silk worms, water bugs, grasshoppers, bees, worms, etc.

Secondary crops grown by the peasants were either for consumption (tubers, corn), or export crops to bring in a little cash. They were essentially dry season
crops, and according to Gourou's estimate did not cover more than 250,000 hectares in the Tonkin Delta, compared to 1,100,000 hectares devoted to rice. Gourou thought that this area could certainly be increased by developing a hydraulic system that would make possible irrigation of the high lands that are too clayey and hard for cultivation in the dry season.

E. Rural population, Employment and Underemployment.

The population is highly concentrated in the small delta areas. For example, in 1930, 7 million inhabitants lived in the 14,500 square kilometers of the Tonkin delta, and 1 million inhabitants were spread out over the remaining 97,000 square kilometers of Tonkin. The question of employment and underemployment is largely governed by the rhythm of agricultural production. According to Gourou's calculations, based on labor requirements per field with Tonkinese work methods, the total amount of work available does not amount to more than 125 work days per person. But some of this idleness is imposed by the seasons, and there is even a lack of labor in some areas during the heavy work periods. Very elemental improvements in the efficiency of human work, such as more economical means of transportation and improving the paths to the fields, would result in an oversupply of labor even at the times of heaviest work, Gourou noted. The economist Paul Bernard maintained that in the early 30s there were two and one half times more workers in Tonkin than were necessary for the cultivation of all the arable land.

Some of the labor surplus was absorbed in handicrafts. It was estimated in 1938 that of 6.5 million people in lower Tonkin, 200,000 devoted most of their time to handicraft work (there were whole villages specializing in basket weaving, carpentry, paper making, etc.), and 800,000 at least some weeks of the year. Handicraft production was very common to supplement income in off-season time.

Rural-urban migration was not significant in relieving rural overpopulation.
Gourou estimated that 1,000 peasants went to the cities to seek work as servants or coolies per year, which was not an important sum compared to the annual excess of births over deaths, which was 65,000-100,000.

Population growth in the Tonkin delta, according to later figures, was even greater than the range indicated above. According to census figures, the population of Tonkin increased from 6,851,000 inhabitants (1928) to 8,096,000 (1931 census), and to 8,700,000 (1936 census). (However, these official figures were not the result of a real census, but of more or less theoretical calculations.) This birth rate of 4% was high compared to other Asian regions at the same time: 3.4% in the Philippines in 1925, 31.7% in the Straits Settlements and 3.5% in Cochinchina in 1927.

F. Income distribution

There is data on this, but it is admittedly not very accurate. Gourou used statistics from a 1936 study in order to arrive at an evaluation of the income of various classes of the rural population in Tonkin, but it probably indicates too high an income for the lowest class, which must borrow money at usurious rates and sell the harvest immediately at lowest market price and buy it back later at a higher price. Similarly, the income of the highest class is probably underestimated, for this class gets additional funds from usury and speculation in rice. The figures result from the average of a sample of 10-20 families in each category. "Poor peasants" are the 50-60% of the peasant families without, or almost without land. "Small proprietors" are those who cultivate about 1 hectare of ricefields and own one draft animal. "Well-off proprietors" work properties covering 1-5 hectares, and unless they include numerous members of working age they must use hired laborers. "Rich proprietors" own more than 5 hectares of land (the sample chosen ranged from 6 to 144, the average for the 12 families being 25 hectares. These families were unanimously considered "exceedingly rich" by the peasants. Conversion into dollars is at the rate given by Gourou: 40 francs to the dollar in 1938.
Table 4. Income distribution in Tonkin, 1936.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income</th>
<th># of family members</th>
<th>family income</th>
<th>spent for food</th>
<th>% of family income</th>
<th>income per person</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poor peasant</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>$23</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>$4.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>small proprietor</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>$45</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
<td>$8.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>well-off proprietor</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>$130</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
<td>$14.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rich proprietor</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>$402</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>$44.63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comparison of urban and rural sector:

The source cited above for rural income made a comparison of the income of the small peasant proprietor with the budget of an average worker family in Nam Dinh: $46 per year for a family of 4 with 2 wage-earners. The worker's standard of living is not actually as high as that of the small proprietor, for he has to pay rent and buy all his food, whereas the peasant can gather some that doesn't enter into the calculations used in the table. The percentage of income spent on food is between that of the poor peasant and that of the small proprietor: 72%.

Hoang Van Chi says that an exhibit showing the difference between the possessions of poor peasants and landlords displayed in Hanoi after the Vietminh returned to the city in 1954 was closed after some visitors remarked that if that was the way a landlord lived, his standard of living was lower than that of a Hanoi factory worker. Either Hanoi factory workers must have had a much higher income than those of Nam Dinh, or the unimpressed visitors were middle class Vietnamese who did not know how Hanoi factory workers lived. Another explanation, that given by Hoang Van Chi, was that the war years had lowered incomes in the Vietminh zone, whereas the occupied towns were well supplied with goods imported from France or supplied by the American Aid missions, so that living standards in the towns tended to be exceptionally and artificially high.
G. Supplementary Services and Supplies.

Except for some major hydraulic works which put an end to the disastrous floods which used to ravage the Tonkin delta, the French record in this regard was abysmal. Agricultural services were earliest and best organized in Cochinchina, where they served the large French ricegrowers and plantations. Experimental stations elsewhere were devoted mainly to industrial crops: les Services Agricoles du Tonkin mainly did research on sericulture. A Rice Office was set up in 1930 to establish experimental fields, study fertilizers, combat diseases, select seeds. This did not even succeed in serving the Cochinchinese ricegrowers: in 1936 the Chamber of Agriculture of Cochinchina unanimously adopted a resolution stating that the Rice Office had "achieved no practical results as regards improving the quality of rice."

1. Information.

Had there been much agricultural information to disseminate, or an interest on the part of the French administration in reaching the native peasant, it would have been difficult, for the illiteracy rate was very high (95% according to North Vietnamese sources). An anti-illiteracy campaign was one of the first and most important of the Vietminh mobilization campaigns.

2. Credit.

The French administration made a first attempt to deal with the problem of usury by setting up the Credit populaire agricole in 1928. Its aim was to make money available at a decent rate of interest (12% per year, approximately). The attempt was a complete failure, and in fact only made things worse: the small peasant did not have the necessary collateral to borrow, but well-to-do peasants and landlords could borrow for their own use, and used these funds to make usurious loans.

3. Rates and terms of borrowing.

According to a 1936 report, the rate of interest was generally from 3 to 5% per month, but could be as high as 10%, or 120% per annum. Especially when taxes were due, rates of 3% per day or 90% per month were not unusual. In short, the poor were at the mercy of the rich, and would accept any conditions. In the case of small loans granted
to a person with nothing at all; it was normal to pay back 3 times the loan.

French attempts to remedy this were minimal and had little effect. After a
decree of July 1926, imprisonment for debt in commercial matters was no longer
automatic, but limited to the express request of the creditor (who had to
show "obvious bad faith" on the part of the debtor). Moneylenders were able
to get around decrees limiting the interest rate (eg 1934: legal rate of interest
fixed at 5%) by making out the contract for the sum of the loan plus interest.

4. Supplies: The price of chemical fertilizer kept it out of the reach
of most peasants. The low productivity of the area could be attributed mainly
to lack of selected seeds, fertilizer and agricultural equipment.

5. Infrastructure: From the point of view of the peasant economy, the French-
built roads and railroads were negative income: they cost the peasant tax money and

corvé labor but were irrelevant to the peasant economy.

The rivers of Tonkin were diked against flooding (a measure which led to
reduced land fertility over time, as the rivers carried silt laden water to
the sea, and the land was irrigated with rain water). After a series of
dam breaks in the early 1900s culminating in the terrible floods of 1927 the
French drew up and put into effect a comprehensive program to strengthen the dikes.
They were rearranged, extended, reinforced and heightened. The government also
devoted sums to irrigation projects: according to a report in 1936, in Tonkin
120,000 hectares had been brought under cultivation by irrigation and drainage
projects, and work already under way promised to increase this figure to over
350,000, plus similar projects begun in Annam. (In Tonkin, drainage is a more
serious problem than irrigation, and more crops are lost due to waterlogging than
drought). However, this increase in productive capacity often did not benefit
the peasants of the area at all. Henry noted that one source of large landholdings
was that when an irrigation network was about to be established, rich landowners
easily found out about the plans and, before the peasant could learn of the imminent
increase in the value of his land, make very attractive offers.
During the war the hydraulic works and transportation routes were severely damaged, and the first years of peace were devoted to rebuilding to the previous level.


A tenant farmer was hardly ever allowed to dispose freely of his own share of the crop (estimated at about 50% of the harvest), as the landlord usually claimed control of the entire produce.

Rice trade was almost entirely in the hands of Chinese, who controlled the market and had de facto monopoly. Vietnamese played a secondary role as intermediaries in the internal market. In general, small producers (0 to 1.5 hectares) were in debt and sold their rice as soon as they produced it in order to pay their debts. The small producer without too many debts sometimes kept some rice for family consumption, but most often sold all of it. As a result, in areas of the delta where small property predominated during the harvest months there were massive sales which lowered prices. Having sold the entire harvest, the small owner had to eat substitute foods (tubers or corn), or buy rice on the market with his salary from day labor. Sometimes the small peasant had to sell his paddy still unharvested in the field (at a much lower rate than even the harvest market price). In years of good harvest the peasant had to transport his rice to market or to the merchants, but in bad years the merchants (or rather their intermediaries) generally went to the producer.

Middle-sized and large landlords would sell some paddy to pay their taxes, but keep paddy for food, and if they had storage facilities would also keep rice for speculation. Large landowners especially went in for rice speculation, as rice was safer to keep than money, which could be stolen.

H. Peasant associations and power.

Henry summed up the power relations in the countryside as follows: Landlords have continued relations with the mandarins and the Europeans of the
district or province capital, and they used it. The poor peasant knew that even if he was in the right, he would be foolish to initiate a lawsuit against a rich man, for the case would be lost before it began. Therefore he resigned himself to the common fate of losing his possessions. 66
III. Land Reform Program

III A. Communist Party agrarian reform policies and the 1953 Land Reform law.

The historical antecedents of DRV agrarian policy date back to 1930, when the Indochinese Communist Party, forerunner of the Lao Dong (Workers') Party, was founded. The Party's first program called for a radical agrarian revolution and the overthrow of French imperialism. It maintained that the national revolution and the agrarian revolution were inseparable. This radical reform called for the requisitioning of all lands belonging to foreign and native landlords and to the Church to give them to middle and poor peasants.

In 1939, responding to an earlier swing in Comintern strategy, the Party Central Committee made a major change in policy to a broad nationalist united front. The nationalist revolution became the primary consideration, and the agrarian question subordinate to it. Whereas in its 1932 program the Indochinese Communist Party had maintained that landlords and the bourgeoisie would inevitably support the French against the independence movement, in 1939 the Party stated that "most of the small and middle bourgeoisie of the country also hate the imperialists." This change of political and class line entailed a change in the agrarian program. Only the land of landlords who were pro-French was to be confiscated.

In 1941 the Vietminh was established. The Vietminh was a united front organization led primarily by the Indochinese Communist Party but including other Vietnamese nationalists.

On September 2, 1945 Ho Chi Minh declared the independence of Vietnam. A Vietminh government was formed, cabinet ministers appointed, governmental decisions made. However, this government failed in its attempt to win international recognition. The French were determined to regain control of the country, and towards the end of 1946 war broke out between France and the Vietminh. During the years of war that followed, until the Geneva Agreements ended the conflict in 1954, there were large areas of Vietnam in which the Vietminh was the effective government.

The description of Vietminh agrarian policies before 1954 which follows applies to Vietminh-controlled areas. From small base areas at the beginning of the conflict, Vietminh control expanded by 1953 to include most of the North Vietnamese countryside.
Map 2

Areas of Vietminh control in 1953.

THE SITUATION IN MAY 1953
General Navarre's Map

Vietminh agrarian policy during the period from 1945 to 1953 developed within the framework of the united front political line. Although the land belonging to French colonialists and pro-French Vietnamese was confiscated and distributed, the right of other landlords to collect rent was not challenged. As a compromise measure, a 25% rent reduction was stipulated with the intention of alleviating the burden on peasants without alienating "patriotic landlords". (Since rent had generally been about 50% of the crop, this brought the rent down to 37.5% of the crop, the same as the Kuomintang rent ceiling applied by the Chinese Communist Party during the United Front period in China.)

The rent reduction policy did not have much effect at first, nor did the government make a concerted attempt to implement it, for the main problem at first was simply to raise agricultural production. Due to the Japanese policy of making peasants grow industrial crops and disruptions due to hoarding and speculation in rice at the end of World War II there was a disastrous famine in 1944-45 during which two million people died. As a result, all efforts in the agricultural sector were concentrated on increasing production. The situation began to recover in 1946, but the outbreak of war at the end of that year necessitated a reorganized war economy, and continued emphasis on production.

On July 14, 1949 the policy of rent reduction was finally embodied in a formal decree. Apparently previous pronouncements on rent reduction had been guidelines rather than laws, for when a mobilization to reduce rent was carried out in 1953 only rents collected in excess of the 25% reduction in the period subsequent to the decree of July 1949 were considered illegal.

It is indicative of the caution of Vietminh agrarian policy 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. A decree issued then abolished debts contracted before August 1945 and reduced interest rates to 13% per annum for cash loans and 20% per annum for loans in kind.
In 1950 there were important changes on the international and domestic scene with implications for the national united front political line. The Communist Party had come to power in China, and extended its control to the Vietnamese border. In October 1950 the French posts on the Sino-Vietnamese border fell to the Vietminh, which strengthened the Vietminh position in their base areas. On the other hand, in mid-1950 the U.S. began to extend considerable aid to the French war effort. Both sides, thus, were strengthened, and the war intensified.

In order to enlist more Vietnamese support, France granted partial independence to the Bao Dai government: the Elysee Accords were ratified by the French parliament in early 1950. The French policy of Vietnaming 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.

The position of the Communists within the Vietminh was strengthened by the changed situation in China and the fact that the U.S. had begun aiding the French. Domestically, the possibility of the Vietminh keeping or increasing its support among the richer elements of society receded as the French held out partial independence to a conservative government. Therefore the importance of the national united front began to dwindle. One indication of this is the fact that in February 1951 the Communist Party, which had been officially dissolved in 1945, was reestablished under its present name, the Lao Dong Party.

In May 1951 an important change in agrarian policy was made in the form of a new agricultural tax. A progressive tax on agricultural production replaced old taxes, contributions and indirect taxes paid by the peasants to the Vietminh government. According to a North Vietnamese source, this tax was "more and more opposed by the landlords and warmly welcomed by the poor peasants."

Despite these important changes in 1951, the policy of united front with anti-French landlords remained in effect until 1953. This is most likely an indication of deep division and debate over agricultural policy within the Party leadership. For example, Gerard Chaliand writes, on the basis of interviews in
1967, that the 1953 land reform was "rather late, in the view of the Vietnamese leaders themselves (for they considered that the programme should have been set in motion two years earlier)." 14

It is probable that advocates of "land to the tiller" reform argued that it would help the war effort by appealing to the great majority of Vietnamese, the poor and landless peasants who wanted to own the land they tilled. Those who favored postponing land reform most likely maintained that landlords still had a strong psychological, social and political hold over the peasant masses, and were tied to the peasants by kinship and religion, so that an attack on landlords would sow confusion among the peasantry as well as end any landlord support for the Resistance. 15 Truong Chinh, then Secretary General of the Lao Dong Party, may well have been one of the main advocates of a speedy transition to land reform. As early as July 1950 he called for "complete realization" of the slogan "land to the tiller". 16

Early in 1953 a new land tenure policy began to emerge, starting with a mobilization of peasants to put into effect existing legislation on reduced rents and rates of interest. 17 A decree of March 1953 started preparation for the transition to a more radical policy by calling for the classification of the rural population into landless agricultural laborers, poor peasants, middle peasants, rich peasants and landlords. 18

Radical agrarian reform affecting all landlords' property, including confiscation and redistribution, was carried out in pilot zones in Vietminh controlled areas in North Tonkin and North Annam from April to August 1953. Despite shortcomings which included the problem of mistaken classification which was to become so serious in the later land reform campaign, the Vietminh leadership considered the experiment a success. 19

In November 1953 the "theses on the agrarian question" of the Party Central Committee set forth the major characteristics of the new, land to the tiller, agrarian policy. The united front with the landlords was over. The Party's new
class line was to rely firmly on the landless and poor peasants; to unite closely with the middle peasants; to form alliance with the rich peasants; to abolish feudal exploitation step by step, while differentiating between the various categories of landowners.\textsuperscript{20}

21

The 1953 Agrarian Reform Law.

On December 4, 1953, the National Assembly of the DRV passed the Agrarian Reform law, designed to be the basic legislation governing the land reform program. Although the law was theoretically to apply throughout the DRV, it was in fact mainly designed for, and carried out in, the rice-growing delta areas inhabited by ethnic Vietnamese. Article 37 stated that the government would take special decisions for the regions inhabited by ethnic minorities, taking into account the situation in each region. Mechanized estates and plantations of commercial crops (coffee, rubber, modern orchards, etc.) were not subject to redistribution (article 22). (These later became state farms.)

Peasants benefiting from land redistribution would become full owners of the land, with the right to mortgage, sell, donate or will their property. They were not to have to pay anything for this land either to the state or to the former owners. (article 31)

The following principles were to govern the distribution of land, which was to take place at the village level.

1. the urgency of each family's need.
2. consideration of the present occupant of the land (ie priority to present tenant), and of the quality and location of the land.
3. distribution to be prorated on the basis of mouths to feed and not the work force available in each family\textsuperscript{22}
4. the average area per head and average yield in the village will be the guiding norms in the distribution.
5. Although in principle the fields of one village will be distributed to the inhabitants of that village, if a village has relatively few people and much land some of this land may be given to another village with a large population and little land.

\textsuperscript{22} (Article 26)
The aspect of the land reform law which caused the most trouble, leading to political unrest and errors so serious that there had to be a year devoted to "rectification of errors", was the question of what land was to be subject to confiscation and redistribution. Landlords were to lose their land (the December 1953 law specified two forms: confiscation and requisition with compensation), but rich peasants' lands were not to be touched. However, there was no specific indication of just how much land was owned by a landlord and how much by a rich peasant. The basic legislation on classification was a decree of March 1953, which was vague and confusing. A landlord was defined as a landowner whose principal livelihood came from the exploitation of the labor of others. A rich farmer either owns or rents his land and works it with the help of agricultural laborers.

A decree of March 1 1955 attempted to clarify the classification of the rural population. A poor peasant can rent as much as 120 days of work per year, a middle peasant, 120-240, a rich peasant, over 240. All categories of peasant must work on their land themselves at least 120 days per year. Landlords rent their land out and work less than 120 days per year on their land. Families with members working for the state, either in the administration or the army, had the right to 120 extra days of hired labor.

This "clarification" of the original decree could only add to the confusion. For example, a family devoting at least 120 days of work to its land and with 2 sons working for the government or in the army could hire up to 360 days of work per year but still be classified a "poor peasant" family (a classification with political advantages). A family with many mouths to feed but few adult able-bodied workers might have to hire extra labor and have a lower standard of living than a family with several workers farming the same sized area without having to "exploit" non-family labor. In sum, since the scale is based on labor, and admits special cases, in many cases it might not correspond to the standard of living of the family, and therefore seem unjust.
In marginal cases, who is to say whether a landowning peasant works 120 days on his land, and therefore is a rich peasant, entitled to keep his property, or whether he only works 110 days, in which case his land is subject to confiscation?

According to the Party's class line, "rely on poor peasants and agricultural laborers," classification depends mainly on the judgement of the very people who are to receive expropriated land. In the North Vietnamese context of extreme land shortage, land hungry peasants tried to find as many landlords as possible, so that there would be enough land to go around.

These structural defects in a land reform law to be applied in one of the world's most overpopulated agricultural regions led to a land reform program full of serious errors, including executions, imprisonment and expropriations which were declared mistaken in the "rectification of errors" (September 1956-November 1957). However, as the mistakes were considered by the government and Party leadership to have been errors of implementation rather than defects of the law itself, the "rectification of errors" will be discussed in subsequent sections.

Theoretically, landlords could part with their lands in several ways. According to article 3 of the land reform law, traitorous or reactionary landlords as well as cruel notables (not necessarily landlords) would have all or part of their properties confiscated, according to the gravity of their crimes against the people or the state. That part of their land and other property which is not confiscated would be subject to requisition without compensation. Confiscation was considered to be a degrading measure, whereas requisition without compensation was not, hence this fine distinction. Article 4 stipulated that progressive personalities, landlords who had participated in the Resistance, and other landlords who were not cruel notables would be subject to requisition with compensation of their land, livestock and farming instruments. Their other property would not be touched. The payment would be equal to the value of the average annual
production of the land and the current price for livestock and farm instruments on the local market. The payment was to be in special treasury notes, redeemable in 10 years, with a 1.5% yearly interest. It is not known how many of these bonds were actually given out, if any. There has been no mention of redeeming them: by 1964 most private land ownership had been eliminated through collectivization, and paying landlords' bonds would have been an anachronism indeed, had any ex-landlord been so politically foolish as to present one. The most favorable category was not requisition with compensation, but the right of donation. When the land reform policies were amended slightly after independence the right of donation was more widely granted. These distinctions seem to have existed on paper only.
Institutional arrangements.

The execution of the National Assembly's Land Reform law was not entrusted to existing government or Party organizations. New Land Reform Committees, to be set up at the national, regional and provincial levels, were made responsible for the execution of the law. (Article 32) Top leaders of the Lao Dong Party and the DRV government took positions of responsibility in the land reform campaign, indicating the high degree of importance attached to it. Ho Chi Minh himself presided over the national Land Reform Committee. Truong Chinh, then Secretary General of the Lao Dong Party, was a member of this committee. Other members included Ho Viet Thang, Vice-Minister of Agriculture and Forestry and member of the Lao Dong Central Committee and Le Van Luong, Director of Administrative Affairs in the Office of the Prime Minister, member of the Lao Dong Central Committee and head of the Party's Central Organization Board.

At the village level, the Executive Committee of the Peasants' Association was the responsible organ. (Article 33) However, this organization was not to initiate land reform in the village. For example, a publication of the National Peasants' League Committee in 1954 instructed Peasants' Associations: "Our main task while waiting for the cadres to come to start a land reform campaign is to increase production". The land reform cadres are not explicitly mentioned in the law, although, as the executive arm of the Land Reform Committees in the village they are implicitly included in article 32, which gives the Land Reform Committees the task of "directing the concrete work of mobilizing the masses to carry out this reform". Although Peasants' Associations were urged to expel landlords and "terminate the membership of rich peasants" of their own accord, it was the responsibility of the land reform cadre to make sure that this reorganization had taken place.

Along with the land reform cadres, the key instrument of reform at the local level was the Special Land Reform Tribunals. The Land Reform Law gave these tribunals the job of:
1. judging traitors, reactionaries, cruel notables and all those who oppose or sabotage the land reform.
2. deciding lawsuits over lands and other property and suits involving the land reform.
3. deciding cases where a person's social class is in dispute.

(article 36)
The decisions of this court, including execution, were carried out immediately.
The law forbade imprisonment or execution without trial as well as beatings, torture or corporal punishment. (article 36)

At the 10th session of the Lao Dong Central Committee, held in September 1956, it was acknowledged that grave errors had been made in the execution of the agrarian reform, and steps were taken to rectify the situation. The land reform committees at all levels lost power; they became mere "study groups." Several members of the national land reform committee were demoted. Truong Chinh resigned as Secretary General of the Lao Dong party, and Ho Chi Minh was elected to replace him. Ho Viet Thanh and Le Van Luong were dismissed from their government administrative posts and lost their positions in the Party Central Committee. The Special Land Reform Tribunals were abolished.
Institutional arrangements and political reorganization during land reform.

National level: National Peasants' Liaison Committee

National Government

Lao Dong Party Central Committee

National Land Reform Committee

Regional Land Reform Committee

Provincial Land Reform Committee

Special Land Reform Tribunal

Land Reform cadre

Village level: Peasants' Association

Lao Dong
Party Cell

Resistance & Administration Committee

Land Reform organizations

authority

authority, levels unspecified

reorganization
III C. The objectives of the land reform program

The aims of the reform were military, economic, political and social.

The most important of these, until the decisive Vietminh victory at Dien Bien Phu in May 1954, was the military objective. Towards the end of 1952 the Vietminh leadership found that there was dissatisfaction among the peasantry in the slow progress of agrarian change. Meanwhile, in the French occupied territories, the Bao Dai government's land reform program was having a certain amount of success in attracting Vietnamese to fight against the Vietminh.

The military argument for land reform has been summed up in a North Vietnamese study of DRV economic policies:

The land-poor peasants accounted for the majority of the population and for the bulk of the soldiers of the people's army as well as of those who carried food and munitions to the front. In the very hard conditions of war and with the accelerated rhythm and scale of military operations, and destructions wrought by the enemy, only an unprecedented mobilization of the entire population, especially the large masses of land-poor peasants, could help cope with the situation.

It was clear that one could not continue endlessly to send land-poor peasants to the front while at their villages, their wives had to give the bigger part of the harvest to landlords, present them with gifts on festive days, pay them exorbitant interests for the debts incurred due to sickness, floods or drought, and while their children worked for landlords as unpaid servants and endured all kinds of ill-treatments and brutalities.

In January 1953, the Workers' Party started a campaign mobilizing the masses to carry out land reform. . . . It could be said that the mobilization of the peasant masses offset the very important financial and material aid given by the USA to the French colonialists.

According to General Vo Nguyen Giap, the land reform was one of the decisive factors in the victory at Dien Bien Phu.

Two other important aims of the reform were stated in Article 1, which was entitled "Aim and significance of the Agrarian Reform". The reform would bring about social revolution and economic progress by ending the feudal regime which made ownership of the land the right of the landed class and instituting the system of land ownership by the working peasants. This would release the productive potential of the peasant population and improve agricultural production. These aspects of the reform were successful: landlord control of the land was eliminated, land did go to the tillers, and agricultural production rose. (see sections IV A and B.)
A major objective of the land reform which was not mentioned in the National Assembly's law was the political aim of radically reorganizing administrative and Party organizations in the villages. The national united front policy in effect until the end of 1952 was not an empty slogan: it meant that in villages throughout Vietnam landlords, rich peasants, traditional leaders (elders, religious leaders, and even ex-officials for the French administration) belonged to village Resistance and Administration Committees, Peasants' Associations and village Lao Dong Party cells. The support of these people with economic strength and social and political influence had been necessary, especially in the first precarious years of the regime. However, these were the very people who could be expected to most strongly and effectively resist a social and economic revolution in the countryside, and to fight the socialization of agriculture, the eventual aim of the regime. Therefore, the regime did not trust the Resistance cadres and used the land reform to train new cadres and reorganize village organizations. (see chart in section III B)

In his "Letter to the peasants and cadres on the successful completion of land reform in the North" of August 18, 1956, Ho Chi Minh listed the major achievements of the campaign:

Nearly ten million peasants have received land, tens of thousands of new cadres have been trained in the countryside. The organization of the Party, administration and peasants' associations in the communes has been readjusted.

Sources differ as to how this reorganization took place. According to Hoang Van Chi, the village administrative committee and Party branch in each village were disbanded after the start of the land rent reduction campaign. New, reorganized administrative committees and party branches were recruited entirely from the poor and landless peasants, and all former cadres and Party members who were in any way connected with the landowning class were omitted from the new bodies. Therefore most old party members were not readmitted. Conflict arose between old and new party members: new members denounced old ones as landlords. An unspecified number were shot as reactionaries, and 12,000 sentenced to prison terms. Jean Chesneaux, on the other hand, discussing only the trial land reform period of
1953, carried out in 22 villages, describes very significant, but not total, change. The proportion of poor peasants in the Party rose from 37% to 53%, membership in local peasant organizations doubled, and poor peasants gained a predominant influence in the local administration.

Whatever its extent, the reorganization of local level Party and administrative organizations was reversed during the rectification of errors, when the old cadres and Party members made a come-back. The key 10th session of the Lao Dong Central Committee (September 1956) came to the decision that during land reform the value of village organizations had been underestimated.

The 12,000 arrested old Party members cited above in Hoang Van Chi's account were released. There was much hostility between old and new Party members, and even murder cases. Village organizations and Party cells were once again reorganized, only this time new Party members were expelled. The following statistics were given for Nghe An province.

"Proletarians" admitted to village committees after Land Reform: 1,839
Number of above expelled from village committees during rectification of errors: 1,162
Number of new party members in expelled group: 900

Thus the rectification of errors involved a purge of new cadres and Party members by the old cadres and comrades they had purged. It was described as follows by an ex-land reform cadre:

The Rectification of Errors was mostly carried out by competent cadres who had to remain silent in earlier denunciation sessions, and also by the old cadres from the Resistance who were mistreated during the land reform of 1956. These old cadres from the Resistance had seen their land confiscated or perhaps they had been physically mistreated, too. But they patiently waited for the Rectification of Errors to come. When it did come, they rose up to remove the incompetent peasants from the government organizations in the villages and districts.

Thus the reform failed in its political objectives: in trying to correct for an earlier rightist policy so many leftist excesses were carried out as to cause serious unrest in both the Party and the population. The Resistance cadres were reinstated, putting the situation back where it started, but with some bitterness and discouragement added.
III D. Implementation of land reform

Land reform was carried out in four stages.

1. Land reform cadres arrive in the village, and carry out the "three withs" policy; i.e. they eat with, live with, and work with selected poor peasants of the village with the aim of gaining the peasants' confidence, learning about the local situation, explaining that their poverty is a result of their exploitation by the landlord class, and telling them that the government supports anti-landlord struggle and redistribution of landlord land.¹

2. Classification of the population according to the rural population decree of March 1953 and its subsequent clarifications. According to the land reform law, this is entrusted to the Executive Committee of the Peasants' Association. In practice, the judgement of the most influential poor peasants and the land reform cadre was probably the most decisive factor. As was discussed in section III C, the land reform cadre was responsible for reorganizing the Peasants' Associations.

3. The dispossessing of landlords: here the Special Land Reform Tribunal enters into play. There are no exact figures on how many landlords were affected. According to Bernard Fall, the best-educated guesses on the subject are that probably close to 50,000 were executed in connection with the land reform and at least twice that number arrested.²

4. Redistribution. The most striking characteristic of the redistribution of land was that it was carried out entirely within the village. Article 25 of the land reform law stipulated that "refugees", i.e. residents who are not natives of the village, if they are both poor and strong enough to farm, may be admitted to redistribution if the local peasants consent. However, they will not have the right of property, but only a right of usufruct on the lands allotted to them which would revert to the village should they leave. As one eyewitness observer of the early stages of the land reform noted, the fact that the village redistributes the land to its own members is a very important factor, "since it retains the functions of the village as an elementary cooperative unit."³ Indeed, it restored the importance of the village, which had been adversely affected by developments under French rule.
In September 1956, in response to mounting criticism and reports of unrest and discontent in the countryside, the Lao Dong Central Committee decided to initiate the rectification of errors. It was too late to prevent demonstrations and riots in several places in the country. The most serious incident occurred in Quỳnh Lưu district, Nghệ An, where demonstrations in November against land reform errors and the treatment of Catholics were suppressed by troops.4

The phases of the Rectification of Errors were: 1) survey of damage done and release from prison of falsely accused and incorrectly classified peasants. The regime admitted that 30% of the persons convicted as landlords were erroneously condemned. Some 12,000 "falsely accused" peasants were freed, and an estimated 15,000 executed men were offered decent graves. 2) The second phase included the reclassification of peasants and restitution or compensation for erroneously expropriated property. This was to be carried out by concessions and negotiation between the beneficiary of land reform and the expropriated peasant. According to a North Vietnamese study of land reform, "only a minor part of the distributed land was subjected to readjustment". 3) The final stage was review, inventory and reindoctrination of local personnel. The campaign ended in November 1957 in a series of provincial "recapitulation conferences".

The major cause of the errors in the execution of the land reform seems to lie in the fact that land reform cadres were under pressure from above and below to find a significant number of landlords. The higher echelons wanted to eliminate class enemies in the countryside as a step towards eventual collectivization, and the poor peasants wanted enough land to go around. The problem was, many of the landlords had gone South: between the passage of the land reform law in December 1953 and the withdrawal of the last French troops from the Hải Phòng regroupment area in early 1955, landlords had time to flee to French controlled areas and then South. For example, Joseph Starobin witnessed a public accusation session against a couple of landlords in 1952. These landlords controlled the rice land and forests of two villages. He noted that "the peasants had acted none too
soon", for the landlords had been preparing to flee to Hanoi, then under French
control. Gerard Chaliand's study of North Vietnamese villages cites numerous instances
in which several, or all, of the landlords in a given village had gone South.

Planning for the land reform did not take this migration sufficiently
into account. According to most accounts, there were "quotas" of the number of
landlords cadres were expected to find and bring to trial. At any rate, there
is no doubt that it was the land reform cadre's main task to discover landlords,
and the job of the Special Tribunals to judge them. A cadre who was not able
to find landlords might be suspected of having the wrong class stand; of not
relying on the poor peasants, and of favoring landlords. Much of the landlord
property had already been distributed before the beginning of the land reform
campaign: according to a North Vietnamese study, half of the land which had
changed hands by the end of the land reform had already been distributed on
a temporary basis during the earlier reforms. Thus, at the start of the
land reform campaign, there were more landless and land poor peasants than
there were landlord properties still undistributed. And as landlords who had
supported the Resistance or were not "cruel notables" were entitled to keep a
portion of land equal to that of shares redistributed to poor peasants, it was
to the advantage of the landless and land poor to find as many cruel, reactionary
and traitorous landlords as possible. This process was described as follows
by an ex-land reform cadre.

Those darned 'very poor peasants' really messed up the redistribution of
the land. The average landlords were 'promoted' to ferocious landlords,
and the government cadres who knew the right policies of the authorities
did not dare to say anything. We had to sit there and watch them confiscate every landlord's property... Some of the former Resistant who came back to their villages and to their properties were
denounced as 'landlords' by the peasants. In this campaign, the very
poor peasants were given importance. They took advantage of the favored
positions they were in to commit excess; and the government cadres did not
dare say anything because they would be accused of not defending a firm
position about the classes.
III D 1. Redistribution of land ownership.

The village-owned communal land was subject to redistribution in the land reform. This had already begun in previous campaigns in many of the liberated areas. As we have seen in section II, the extent of village-owned land varied considerably from village to village, but averaged 20% of the riceland in Tonkin and 25% in Annam. Land belonging to religious communities was also to be confiscated (article 10), but article 25, section 6 stipulated that the persons responsible for religious cults, including Catholics, Protestants, Buddhists, individuals responsible for ancestorworship and other religious communities, were allowed to retain part of their ricefields for religious expenses. This provision was not sufficiently respected during the land reform, and during the Rectification of Errors religious communities who had been left too little land received additional land.

The implementation of the land reform program was facilitated by the emigration of a large part of the Christian peasant population to South Vietnam. In this way 144,000 hectares of abandoned land became available.

As has been mentioned in previous sections, mechanized estates and areas planted in commercial crops were not redistributed. Unless villagers consented to admit non-native residents in the redistribution, it was limited to native villagers.

The size of redistributed lots varied from village to village, depending on the amount of land available for redistribution and the number of villagers entitled to receive land. Around one half of the 1.5 million hectares of cultivated land in North Vietnam changed hands. According to North Vietnamese statistics, over 800,000 hectares were redistributed; a Russian source gives a lower figure, 700,000 hectares. Figures also vary on the number of peasants benefiting from the reform. Gittinger gives the figure of 1.6 million households, including 8 million peasants, to gain some land or transferred property. Given his figure of 2.4 million rural households in North Vietnam, this would mean that 2/3 (66.6%) of the peasant families benefited in some way from the reform. Official North Vietnamese
statistics are higher: 2,220,000 families, including 9 million people, or a total of 72% of the rural population. This figure is large enough to include all the peasants who were landless in 1953, cited as 6,888,000 individuals, or 61.5% of the peasant population.

The major social goals of the campaign were accomplished: "land to the tiller" was transformed from a slogan to a reality, and wealth and landholdings were equalized. Of course, absolute equality was not achieved. After the land

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of producer</th>
<th>before</th>
<th>after</th>
<th>before</th>
<th>after</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Landlord</td>
<td>6,779</td>
<td>825</td>
<td>8,108</td>
<td>986</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rich peasant</td>
<td>2,116</td>
<td>2,159</td>
<td>2,531</td>
<td>2,582</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>middle peasant</td>
<td>999</td>
<td>1,565</td>
<td>1,195</td>
<td>1,872</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>poor peasant</td>
<td>343</td>
<td>1,372</td>
<td>410</td>
<td>1,641</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>agricultural worker</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>1,421</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>1,700</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

reform the rich peasant category had approximately 50% more land than the ex-agricultural laborer, and more than 250% that of the new poorest category, the ex-landlord. But before the land reform the differences were far greater: the landlord averaged over 300% of the richest peasant category, and nearly 2,000% of the poor peasant's average holdings. Finally, he had "infinitely" more than the 61.5% with nothing. Most of the landlords had not been wealthy even by urban Vietnamese standards: their average holding per mouth to feed was just over 2/3 of a hectare. But in the land of the blind, the one-eyed is king: in a region where 61.5% of the people owned nothing, and a large proportion of the rest had barely enough to make ends meet, the man who had more than enough to meet his minimal needs was in a position to wield enormous economic, social and political power over his fellow villagers. The land reform effectively put an end to this situation.
III D 2. **Changes in tenancy systems.** It was the aim of the reform to eliminate tenancy, and this was accomplished. According to the policy of the land reform period, however, rich peasants were still allowed to hire agricultural laborers. This form of exploitation was not ended until the cooperativization campaign, when rich peasants were not able to find laborers to work on their land, as the poor peasants had joined agricultural cooperatives.

III D 3. **Colonization.** As the period of land reform was a time of economic recovery after years of war, colonization of virgin land, which was to become important in the later cooperativization stage, played little role. The priority at this time was restoring the productivity of land which had been under cultivation before the war by repairing destroyed and damaged irrigation systems and reclaiming land that had been lying fallow during the war.

III D 4. **Consolidation.** Like colonization, this played no role in the land reform program, but became important later in the cooperative period.

III D 5. **Classification, Identification and titling.** This was poorly executed during the land reform. It was acknowledged that one of the mistakes of the reform was that "cadres, badly guiding the peasants or relying on bad elements, dealt indiscriminate blows in the struggle against the enemy and made an excessive estimate of crop area and land yield."

III E. **Financial aspects. Landlord compensation.**

Although the land reform law called for some requisition with compensation, this does not appear to have been carried out. The state did not provide any funds to recompense people who were judged during the Rectification of errors to have been unjustly affected by the land reform. The people whose land had been expropriated and those who had received the land during the redistribution were to make concessions and negotiate with each other.
In general, landlords were considered to owe the people for past extractions. Their payment of their debt to the people was confiscation of their property, serving time in prison, or losing their life.

III F. Supplementary measures.

The land reform took place during an economic phase of recovery from years of war, therefore the government did not have any funds for supplementary measures during the land reform.

1. **Information:** As noted in section II, the level of education in French Indochina was very low, and very few agronomy experts were trained. Systematic attention to the diffusion of scientific agricultural information was not an aspect of land reform, but became very significant in the later cooperative period.

2. **Credit.** A credit office, providing poor peasants with long term loans at low interest rates, was established in 1950. After the end of the war in 1954 cooperative loan offices were established. 26

3. **Supplies.** No information.

4. **Infrastructure.** The breakdown of capital investment in the first North Vietnamese state plan (1955-1958) was given in 1955 as: 38% for industrial reconstruction, 23% for transport and communications, 20% for agriculture and irrigation, and the remaining 19% for education and social services. 27

5. **Crop procurement and Marketing.** Little information. Truong Chinh mentioned, in 1958, the existence of 204 supply and marketing coops with 1,347,213 members. Explaining the necessity of cooperativization, he stated:

The big concentration of cash in the hands of rich peasants and landlords renders difficult the management of the market and the circulation of money in the countryside because these people are inclined to hoarding, speculation and usury. 28
III G. Mobilization of the Peasantry. (cf section III C)

Mobilization of the peasantry was a major goal of the land reform program. The earliest goal, as noted in section III C, was military mobilization. After the end of the war, political mobilization remained as a major objective.

As was briefly discussed in section III C, the land reform was intended to have the political effect of mobilizing the poor and landless peasants, who had never played an important political role either in the traditional Vietnamese or French colonial periods, into taking an active role in politics. Even during the war against the French, well-to-do villagers had tended to lead the resistance organizations. The land reform was intended as a collective emotional shock to jolt the poor peasants into political action by attacking the traditional village leaders and landlords. Probably a major reason for the mobilization of the poor was to have poor peasant cadres for the cooperativization program. As was discussed in section III C, the mobilization of the poor peasants got out of hand, and in the rectification of errors period many new poor peasant cadres were purged from the party.

III H. The Politics of Implementation.

The most open opposition to the land reform was among Catholics. This was probably because Party cadres tended to discriminate against them as suspect of being former supporters of the French. Perhaps they knew that Catholics were being treated with favoritism by the Catholic-led Diemist regime in the South. This would increase their hostility to the regime in the North. There were reports that during the most serious uprising against the land reform, Catholic peasants in Viph, Nghe An tried to present Canadian members of the International Control Commission with petitions asking that they be allowed to go South.