The Counter-Revolution that Never Came:
The Illegibility of Sabotage in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (1956-1959)

Ken MacLean (Clark University) Colloquium Program for Agrarian Studies, Yale University (25 February 2011).

INTRODUCTION

The paper is intended as a stand-alone piece; however, it is linked to a broader book project, which concerns the complex role documentary practices played in shaping representations of actually existing government in socialist Vietnam. The book manuscript, tentatively titled Governing Documents: Peasant-Bureaucrats and their Pasts in Socialist Vietnam, draws critical attention to three domains linked to one another through the patterned production, circulation, and consumption of forms, charts, tables, reports, photographs, maps, digital multimedia and other graphic artifacts crucial to governing the conduct of others. These domains include efforts by low-level cadres or "peasant-bureaucrats," whom I worked closely with, to negotiate the conflicting demands placed upon them by their administrative superiors and their kith and kin; the models they used to mobilize others to "build" different kinds of socialism in the countryside (1945-present); and the conflicting modes of rationality and affect that informed them both. Attention to these documentary forms, I argue, offers fertile ground for how exploring how documentary practices, many of which originated elsewhere, shaped the continually remaking of socialism in Vietnam.

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"We were tired and hungry all the time." The statement, although factually accurate, caused the cadres who had been assigned to monitor my interview to suddenly stop what they were doing in the background—reading the newspaper, sending text messages, and smoking in the doorway—to listen carefully to what the elderly, but still fit woman said next. I, too, was surprised by her blunt assessment of rural life, for Phạm Thị Vách was nationally known for the contributions she had made towards "building socialism" in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) four decades earlier. However, my efforts to elicit further details from her were unsuccessful and the remainder of our conversation, while pleasant, did not diverge far from the widely-available facts that are routinely cited in official depictions of her life.

Phạm Thị Vách, who later became a Communist Party member and Secretary for the People's Committee in Kim Ty District (Hung Yen Province), first demonstrated her leadership potential in the late 1950s, while still a teenager. Concerned by heavy rains, she mobilized her peers to save the fall harvest one year by carrying out urgently needed repairs to dikes that protect Hung Cuong Commune from catastrophic flood. Since Vách led by example, she personally dug and then carried more than 250 cubic meters of muddy soil to help reinforce the earthen embankments holding back the branches of the Red River that completely surround the low-lying commune on all sides. The ad hoc campaign, which lasted fifty days, was successful and other noteworthy achievements followed, as did a series of increasingly prestigious awards for the young woman affectionately dubbed the "Red River girl" in the state-controlled press. These awards culminated in the title of "Labor Hero" and a First-Class Medal of Merit, which Hồ Chí Minh personally handed to Vách in 1961 in recognition of the role she played in transforming the commune, long known for producing more beggars than rice, into a more prosperous one.

This achievement was later celebrated in verse:

Hung Cuong has a newly built sluice,
A freshly packed dike, a recently planted tree [for]

> *Whoever stops and looks.*
> *Nowadays there is a Party, and the banks of the Red River have levees*
> (Thanh Duy 1962, 44).

As the poem suggests, the Communist Party played an important role in this transformation. Indeed, a casual review of the policies, books, pamphlets, newspaper articles and other forms official discourse published during this period all reach a similar conclusion. However, the relationship of the Party to different segments of the state's then rapidly expanding bureaucracy and the rural populations under their administrative purview was far more complicated and fraught with contradictions as well as unanticipated consequences than has generally been recognized to date.

Such tensions were perhaps most evident on construction sites where low-level cadres utilized a combination of volunteer, conscripted (corvée), and wage labor to (re-) build essential infrastructure in the DRV following independence. Details on these "regimes," drawn primarily from archival documents, highlight why the category of labor was both indispensable and inadequate for understanding official efforts to "lay the foundations" of state socialism in the countryside between late 1956 and late 1959, as its boundaries were neither distinct nor discrete; instead, the category of labor became increasingly "fuzzy," to borrow the term Katherine Verdery has used to describe the property forms found in many parts of post-socialist Europe (1999). The "transition" *out* of state socialism, Verdery noted, did not completely transform the political, economic, and jural systems of these countries or the cultural values and practices that informed them; quite the contrary occurred, as the process transformed some aspects of these systems, but left others intact and reconfigured still others. Consequently, the property forms that emerged there after 1989 typically contained a complex mixture of rights and obligations, which made it difficult to determine where collective claims ended and private ones began (53-55)—hence, Verdery's use of the term "fuzzy" to describe them.

Verdery's observations, although focused on the reorganization of property relations following decollectivization, are not limited to the European context or, for that matter, the "transition" out of state socialism. A similar case can also be made about the "transition" *into* socialism, as this process did not wholly eradicate one order and replace it with another. This was especially the case in the DRV between

late 1956 and late 1959 when most of the policies, procedures, and organizational models needed to establish a centrally planned economy based on the collective ownership of the means of production were first put in place. But upon closer examination, the "transition" into state socialism turns out to have been as "indistinct, ambiguous, and partial" (Verdery 1999, 55) as was its unmaking decades later.

Many factors contributed to this "fuzziness," but few more so than the growing confusion and conflict over the proper meaning, value, and purpose of peasant labor on the eve of collectivization. Labor, it should be recalled, is not an abstract thing, though the category is often quantified as such, but rather an embodied process that generates things that can be used or exchanged. Labor, in other words, is a form of property in addition to being productive of it. This helps explain why the same action can be seen as a gift in one context, an in-kind contribution in another, and a commodity in still another depending on the bundle of rights and obligations associated with the labor performed (Lampland 1995; Hann 1998). Thus close attention to disagreements over how and under what conditions low-level cadres could mobilize peasants and temporarily redirect their labor-time towards different Party/state objectives offers insights into a number of inter-related trends, three of which I explore here.[1]

First, low-level cadres utilized a combination of labor regimes to (re-) build essential infrastructure, such as irrigation works, in the DRV; but, since the logic that informed each regime—volunteer, conscripted, and wage, respectively—ran counter to the others, these same cadres frequently found it difficult to mobilize and to manage sufficient numbers of peasants on a consistent basis to achieve all of the Party/state's declared goals. Second, the lack of standardization over the terms and conditions of the different forms of labor used further exacerbated this problem, as the rights and obligations the Party/state extended to volunteer, conscripted, and wage laborers on these (re-) construction projects were neither stable nor widely enforced. Third, the confusion and conflicts that resulted from these disagreements, both "inside" and "outside" the Party/state, were not limited to the

[1] Neither the "Party" nor the "state" can be accurately understood as coherent entities that think or act like people (MacLean 2005, xv-xviii). Nonetheless, I employ the terms here, including their unorthodox combined form (Party/state), as a strategic essentialism to signal instances where their institutional unity can be *rhetorically* presumed to exist.

construction sites; they had an adverse impact on other domains of life as well, but especially food production. These patterns, when taken together, complicate the existing historiography on the "transition" *into* state socialism in the DRV, which still depict the events leading to the collectivization of agriculture as being orderly, sequential, and inevitable in nature when in fact none of these terms accurately apply. Instead, quite the opposite was the case, as the labor regimes used at the time contributed to the very forms of inequality and injustice Party/state policies sought to eradicate—namely, exploitation, hunger, poverty, and landlessness. Thus the decision to fully collectivize land in addition to labor, animals, and tools in rural areas in late 1959 did not represent the predetermined outcome of historical processes, as is claimed in official accounts, so much as the concerted effort to forestall further socio-economic differentiation in the countryside (MacLean 2005, 187-239).

Close attention to these dynamics additionally recasts the fragmentary descriptions of "sabotage" (*phá hoại*) that permeate many of the party/state documents produced at the time. Not surprisingly, reports of "sabotage" were most widespread in the non-contiguous areas that had remained "occupied territory," i.e. under French control and/or influence, until the end of the First Indochina War (Bộ Nội Vụ 1996). The reports appeared to reconfirm official assumptions that these recently "liberated" areas still contained significant numbers of ideologically suspect citizens whose political views, economic practices, and/or religious beliefs required not only close monitoring, but a combination of incentives (financial, moral, and coercive) to encourage compliance with officially desired forms of conduct (Goscha 2008). Again, such assumptions were not wholly unfounded: different categories of persons opposed to the new order of things—"collaborators," "despotic landlords," and "counter-revolutionaries, among many others—were in fact well-represented in these areas (Thuần Phong 1953, 6; Nam Mộc 1956, 9-12). Moreover, acts of "sabotage," typically attributed to groups of unidentified "enemies" (*địch*), continued to occur well after independence despite concerted efforts "to prevent and to guard against" (*canh gác phòng gian*) them using a variety of means.[2]

[2] For a representative example, see this training manual: *Chống Địch Phá Hoại: Bảo Vệ Sản Xuất Bảo Vệ Tài Sản Nhà Nước (Tài Liệu Học Tập của Nông Dân)* (Hà Nội: Ban Liên Lạc Nông Dân Toàn Quốc, 1956). Provincial

Table 1: Common Forms of "Sabotage" Reported on Construction Projects

- Skipping evening meetings regarding mobilization;
- Disrupting the meetings by arriving late and/or leaving early;
- Disrupting the meetings by speaking badly about the cadres and ideologically committed local activists known as the "backbone element" [*cốt cán*];
- Neglecting to bring food rations or tools when report to work sites;
- Complaining of hunger or pain in one's stomach while at work sites;
- Arriving at work sites late and/or leaving early;
- Wasting time by repeatedly smoking cigarettes or making trips to relieve oneself;
- Sneaking off work sites to urinate or to defecate on the homes and courtyards of others;
- Sneaking off work sites to sleep;
- Ruining food and water supplies by adding hair clippings and other foreign objects;
- Deliberately shoveling dirt into existing canals and other water sources;
- Deliberately dumping dirt in the wrong place.

Source: MacLean (2007, 43)

These incidents affected critical infrastructure, such as irrigation works, and had an adverse, if unknown, impact on food production and thus the politico-moral legitimacy of the nascent party/state more generally. Yet, the much feared counter-revolution did not come.

Why? At first glance, the answer seems simple: these fears appear to have little empirical basis. There is, for example, no record that large numbers of people were arrested and charged with committing acts of "sabotage." The geographically scattered and temporally isolated nature of the incidents mentioned in archival documents further suggest that official anxieties about the ability of these unidentified "enemies" to carry out organized attacks and, in doing so, mobilize other Vietnamese who, although heartened by independence, privately harbored serious reservations about the Communist Party's approach to rule, exaggerated. As a consequence, it becomes tempting to regard the reports of "sabotage" as a response to the emergence of the "internal enemy" (*nội gian*) as a recognizable trope within official discourse and its concomitant use as a mechanism for promoting ideological conformity "inside" and "outside" the party/state (Guillemot 2010).

bodies also produced their own plans to deal with "enemy plots" (*âm mưu địch*) using People's militias, (national) identification cards, and a range of cultural forms (plays, poems, and short-stories) in addition to "study sessions" to raise popular awareness.

This interpretation, while not entirely inaccurate, forecloses other ones, including the possibility that official fears were genuine, if frequently mistaken about the intent behind various acts described as "sabotage." The patterned misreading contributed to an interesting paradox: the parameters of the category—specifically, what words and deeds actually qualified as deliberate attempts to subvert, disrupt, or destroy efforts to "build socialism" in the countryside—were neither agreed upon nor stable in official documents produced at the time. Instead, the opposite was the case, as party/state policies had by late 1956 reversed pre-revolutionary relations of power in the countryside by promoting tens of thousands of rural subalterns, many of them illiterate or only barely so, into positions of locally authority following waves of class struggle, but not yet consolidated the new arrangements (Moise 1983; Trần Phương 1968).[3] The relative "illegibility" of the category thus marks a discursive moment when the materiality of the party/state was simultaneously made and unmade through purported acts of "sabotage" against its policies, personnel, and property (Das and Poole 2004, 10). For this reason, the term "enemy" (*địch*) does not connote an empirically verifiable subject-agent when used in this context so much as a "position without [fixed] identity" (Gayatri Spivak 2010, 37-45).[4] And in doing so, the term reveals the limits of what was knowable within the logic of official discourse at the time (Prakash 2000, 288).

To support my case, the remainder of this paper illustrates why the "fuzzy" nature of labor complicates received assumptions regarding the relationship of the political to the political during the transition *into* socialism (Stoler 2009, 38-39). Most obviously, closer attention to the historical context in which the struggles over labor disputes occurred and claims of "sabotage" made requires us to revisit the dynamics of domination and resistance in post-colonial settings, particularly self-declared socialist ones where class rather than race served as the primary axis for the production and reproduction of new as well

[3] These included eight waves of "land rent and interest reductions" (*giảm tô giảm tức*) and five waves of "land reforms" (*cải cách ruộng đất*).

[4] Spivak's relational stance diverges from conventional understandings of subaltern politics and representations of their subjectivity, as they emerged out of the work of the *Subaltern Studies collective*. However, these too have changed considerably over time.

as old forms of social exclusion and economic marginalization in rural areas (MacLean 2005, 133-186).[5] Closer attention to the historical context also raises a larger issue, which I touch upon at various points but do not develop at length in this paper. Namely, in what ways are the theoretical and methodological insights that emerged out of subaltern studies useful in settings where the "code of pacification" under discussion is the prose of the counter-revolution rather than counter-insurgency (Guha 1987)? And, by extension, what are the limits of such a move given that official anxieties about the ungovernability of the governed during the late 1950s did not center on the classic figure of the "irrational" peasant whose hostility to modernity periodically manifested itself in violence but rather former rural elites that successive waves of class struggle had just transformed into subalterns?[6]

Labor and Its Meanings

Post-war efforts to (re-) build the DRV's essential infrastructure did not mark the first time that representatives of the state had sought to take temporary possession of the labor-time of peasants and redirect it towards other ends. Vietnamese had for centuries discharged their obligations to the state through a combination of conscripted labor (*corvée*), taxes, and military service. Indeed, it is impossible to understand state-formation during the pre-colonial and colonial periods without reference to these demands or popular responses to them, which ranged from passive forms of resistance and flight to armed rebellion and millenarian movements (Scott 2009, 1976; Dutton 2008; Tai 1983). Similar claims can also be made about the crucial role conscripted labor played during the First Indochina War (1946-1954), as independence would have been extremely unlikely without it (Pham Luan 1966). However, the relationship of labor to agricultural production, physical property, and personhood began to change profoundly during the final years of the conflict, first in liberated areas and then, following the end of the First Indochina War in 1954, throughout the DRV.

[5] Gender, although crucial in both contexts, was more problematic since it was a marked category at some moments and an unmarked one at others. The "enemy," for example, was not explicitly gendered in official documents.
[6] Both figures constitute the "Other" that confirms the self; however, they do so differently.

By this point much of the essential infrastructure in the DRV was in dire need of repair, upgrade, and/or expansion. This was especially the case for its irrigation works, as French officials oversaw the completion of only twelve new systems in the Protectorate of Tonkin between 1902 and 1941, many of which failed on a regular basis prior to the First Indochina War (1946-1954). Moreover, all of these systems sustained significant damage during the lengthy conflict, which further increased the likelihood of catastrophic floods, especially in the heavily populated Red River Delta (Ha Ke Tan 1964, 20-1; Phan Khanh 1997, 23-37). To address this problem, low-level cadres used several different methods to mobilize peasant labor at the commune-level and below from 1954 onwards.

The first relied upon voluntary labor contributions, such as those Phạm Thị Vách carried out. These "self-supporting" (*tự tức*) contributions, as they were known during the 1950s, had much in common with the informal labor exchanges peasants routinely organized during the pre-revolutionary era to collectively (re-) build dykes and other related infrastructure on a seasonal basis to prevent natural disasters and to lessen the impact of floods, rot, and drought when they occurred (Tran Duc 1994). Since voluntary contributions were not sufficient to complete mid- and large-scale irrigation works, which frequently required tens of thousands of peasants working in stages over months and sometimes years to complete, relevant ministries also authorized low-level cadres to conscript labor (*dân công*) and to offer labor contracts (*khoán*) to finish their assigned sections on time. Both methods provided payment in cash and/or paddy; however, the meanings associated with each differed significantly as did the amounts given. Conscript labor was defined as a "duty" (*nghĩa vụ*), which all qualified citizens had a moral if not also legal obligation to provide to the Party/state on an annual basis, so payment was fixed. Contract labor, however, was defined as a commodity, which citizens who had satisfied their annual obligation to the Party/state were able to sell, so payment varied. As a consequence, low-level cadres faced a difficult challenge; they had to mobilize substantial numbers of peasants throughout the year to help (re-) build irrigation works, yet separately track their individual contributions and compensate them differently according to the type of labor (voluntary, conscripted, or wage) performed—even where the task, such as carrying dirt to reinforce a levee, was exactly the same.

However, the disagreements over the meaning, value, and purpose of different kinds of labor following the end of war were not limited to irrigation works; rather, they were merely one manifestation of those caused by the Party/state's broader efforts to remake nearly every aspect of life through a seemingly endless series of mass campaigns (MacLean 2005, 133-186). These "emulation campaigns" (*phong trào thi đua*) took different forms; but, all of them were connected to officially authorized "programs of improvement" (Li 2007), which sought to increase the quantity of food produced, the quality of the country's citizens, or, as was often the case, both simultaneously. Since these campaigns followed one another in quick succession and sometimes overlapped with other development initiatives, peasants frequently experienced heavy and frequently conflicting demands on their labor-power, which reduced the amount of time and energy they could devote to other concerns not specifically linked to official objectives. Verdery observed a similar phenomenon in Eastern Europe (1996, 39-57); but whereas, according to her, Eastern European states immobilized the bodies of their citizens in queues, in the DRV (MacLean 2008, 292-294), the Party/state "seized" the time of its citizens by continually mobilizing them to perform labor.

The negative consequences of this loss of time and labor were not limited to the peasants it affected most directly; it also had an adverse impact on policy implementation and Party/state-society relations more generally (Rév 1987, 339-341). Close attention to these dynamics underscores why these emulation campaigns are best viewed not in isolation, but as zones of contest where the "practice of government"—what Tania Murray Li defines as the calculated attempt to direct conduct in particular ways—continually encountered the everyday "practice of politics" (2007, 12), both "inside" as well as "outside" the formal boundaries of the Party/state. So, although these struggles were certainly not limited to the efforts to (re-) construct the country's irrigation works, the moral legitimacy and economic viability of the nascent Party/state was nonetheless heavily contingent upon the ability of its cadres to engineer a dramatic increase in food production (Szalontai 2005). For this reason, these campaigns are at the center of my discussion. I focus particularly on irrigation works in Hung Yen Province, which quickly gained national prominence for the labor contributions of its inhabitants. These contributions were significant

and warranted official recognition, but they were not, as Phạm Thị Vách's opening comment suggests, without costs of their own.

Official Contradictions

The architects of the new, but not yet socialist society of North Vietnam faced a number of significant challenges in 1954. By early 1955, much of the population, including residents of Hanoi, faced serious food shortages, while nearly one million people urgently needed humanitarian aid to avoid starvation owing to bad weather and the disruptive effects the land reforms had had upon agricultural production (BLD 1955). However, the magnitude of the problem did not delay further waves of class struggle connected to the land reforms (1953-1956). Indeed, three more followed in rapid succession, even though it quickly became apparent that the redistribution of land, tools, and draught animals to the country's most disadvantaged peasants would not on its own prevent future famines (Yvon 2008).

To help address this problem, the National Assembly, the legislative arm of the Party/state, issued a Three-Year Plan (1955-1957) that outlined how the economy of the DRV was to be "restored." The eight policies that constituted its core converged in a number of areas, but diverged in others. Some, in recognition of past promises, provided tax incentives to encourage peasant households to expand the amount of land under private cultivation and to revive small-scale entrepreneurial activities, especially animal husbandry; others, which foreshadowed the future, promoted the partial collectivization of the means of production through inter-households labor exchanges to promote greater harmony in the countryside and to raise agricultural yields simultaneously. The tensions among these policies, which reflected theoretical as well as practical disagreements among political elites over the most suitable path for the development of the DRV, were readily apparent on irrigation works. This was because neither of these desired outcomes was possible without such infrastructure, yet other emulation campaigns unfolding concurrently also required the labor-time of peasants to complete. Since the amount of available labor-time was finite, the competing agendas of the different ministries involved meant that peasant bodies were in high demand and shortages inevitable.

The Three-Year Plan directly contributed to this competition since efforts to "restore" the economy were not limited to policy interventions in the countryside. The Three-Year Plan also initiated a period of intense state formation and reorganization, especially in areas where the Party previously enjoyed little or no regulatory authority, such as the Left Bank Region (*Khu Tả Ngạn*). Strategically located between the cities of Hanoi and Haiphong, the region's three million inhabitants helped produce much of the north's food supply, which meant that large parts of Hưng Yên, Hải Dương, Thái Bình, and Kiến An Provinces remained contested territory until the First Indochina War ended in mid-1954.

To help fill these administrative gaps, the Prime Minister expanded the geographic reach of the Party/state and created new "organs," such as the Bureau of Irrigation, which he established in April 1955 within the Ministry of Communications and Public Works. This arrangement, like many others at the time, quickly proved to be unwieldy, so the National Assembly approved a large-scale reorganization of bureaucratic responsibilities in September. One product of this reorganization was the formation of the Ministry of Architecture and Irrigation, headed by Tran Dang Khoa.[7] By year's end, Khoa had opened a Department and an Office of Irrigation in each of the country's administrative regions (*liên khu*) and all of the provinces they contained. However, the creation of these new positions exacerbated the severe shortage of personnel who possessed the desired combination of "morality and ability" (*đức tài*).

This problem was not limited to this particular ministry; it was instead a pervasive one that adversely affected the "practice of government" at all levels of the Party/state for many years. The reasons for this were complex and compounded one another: limited access to formal education stemming from colonial restrictions and nine years of war; ideologically driven purges of politically suspect cadres; class tensions that reinforced divisions between the "old" officials who remained and the "new" ones just appointed; and the sheer pace of bureaucratization more generally (MacLean 2005, 76-186). Between 1955 and 1959, for example, the number of directors and vice-directors at central-level agencies in Hanoi increased by more than 370% (Le Duc Tho 1961, 18-19). Nonetheless, the personnel shortages were

[7] In April 1958, this ministry was again divided into two separate ones—the Ministry of Architecture and the Ministry of Irrigation, respectively. To avoid confusion, I will use the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation throughout.

particularly acute within the Ministry of Architecture and Irrigation, as its cadres needed to have advanced engineering skills in addition to basic administrative ones to be effective (BLTKT 1957).[8]

Not surprisingly, this shortage of technically qualified personnel had a tremendous impact on initial (re-) construction efforts, as the Ministry of Architecture and Irrigation had little choice but to prioritize tasks that needed only minimal expertise, massive amounts of labor, and simple hand tools to complete. While this delayed the start of some major projects, the approach was nonetheless surprisingly successful. Stunning volumes of dirt and rock were moved and concrete poured after the DRV's independence to complete eight new irrigation systems and carry out repairs to existing ones throughout the country (Phan Khanh 1997, 46-7; BTL 1964, 20). Yet the methods used to achieve these impressive results quickly created problems of their own, as the field reports, conferences, and policies issued during the period covered by the first Three-Year Plan (1955-1957) make abundantly clear.

Inter-Ministerial Competition (1955-1956)

In December 1955, Tran Dang Khoa, the Minister of Architecture and Irrigation, announced an ambitious goal at the conclusion of its annual national conference. He called for a forty percent increase in the total area of arable land under irrigation by the end of 1956 (BTLKT 1955, 19). The conference minutes did not record the audience's response to this highly ambitious target; nor did the proceedings explicitly acknowledge that the land reforms, then being implemented in many parts of the DRV (Moise 1983, 201-2). The reforms dramatically limited the ability of the cadres in those provinces that participated in them to achieve even modest gains in the amount of arable land under irrigation, as successive waves of class struggle against "landlords" and other categories of ideologically suspect persons consumed much of the labor-time peasants possessed at the time. Despite this notable silence, other documents produced during this period in addition to those compiled after the fact provide some insights into what happened over the next twelve months.

[8] Bộ Thủy Lợi Kiến Trúc (Văn Phòng), Tập Báo Cáo của BLTKT Tổng Kết 3 Năm Công Tác Thủy Lợi (1955-1957) Phục Vụ Kế Hoạch Khôi Phục Kinh Tế (22/10/1957-2/11/1957) (H.s. 87, v/v).

Rot, caused by waterlogged fields, was a significant problem throughout the Red River Delta in 1955, including Hung Yen, which is only slightly above sea level and receives eighty percent of its annual rainfall between June and September (Le Quy Qunh 1966, 7; BTLKT 1957, 4). Not surprisingly, the rot raised fears that the 1956 spring harvest would be badly affected and the province's approximately six hundred thousand inhabitants would again face severe food shortages, as they had the previous year when widespread crop failures nearly plunged the DRV into famine (BLD 1955). But what made these fears particularly acute was the province's recent history. Since the famine of 1944-1945, which claimed over one million lives north of the seventeenth parallel in only six months, severe weather had produced nine droughts and three floods in Hung Yen (Le Quy Quynh 1966, 8).

To avoid disaster, authorities in the Left Bank Region launched a mass campaign that lasted the first half of 1956. During this period, low-level cadres mobilized the equivalent of three million work-days (*công*) to (re-) build over forty-three kilometers of canals and ditches, irrigating approximately 90,000 *mẫu* of land (SVHTTHH 1995, 61). Even more strikingly, the most difficult and labor intensive tasks were largely completed during the first three days of the annual Lunar New Year celebration—an immensely important festival for ethnic Vietnamese in which all work not related to ritual activities is normally suspended. That year, however, the threat to food security was sufficient for the Central Committees for Bac Ninh, Hung Yen, and Thai Binh Provinces to order large numbers of peasants in early February to remove sections of the dikes along the Red River and the Van Giang Canal in order to channel more freshwater into the brackish fields. In Hung Yen, some ten thousand people endured high winds, bitterly cold water, and thick mud to reach the goals officials set for them: "Only when [fresh] water returns to the fields will the conscripted laborers celebrate the New Year." They finished on the fourth day and, according to one local history, thousands of family members arrived at the construction sites to cheer their kin who had "triumphed over nature" (Quoc Phuong 1964, 10; BLTKT 1957, 10).

The triumph was short-lived, however. Between December 1955 and April 1956 the DRV received only thirty percent of its normal rainfall, adversely affecting over 145,000 *mẫu*—32,000 of which were in the Left Bank Region (BTLKT 1956, 3). The Ministry of Architecture and Irrigation

initiated a campaign to "fight [the] drought" in response to this new crisis and its cadres coordinated with their provincial counterparts to outline plans, which district- and commune-level officials would later implement. Subsequent inspections noted what had been accomplished under severe conditions and very basic tools. Photos proudly showed teams of men completing hand-dug wells that telescoped downwards to reach new sources of freshwater; while others featured women using shoulder poles with baskets attached to gently pour water from the wells onto rice seedlings in parched fields. These and other interventions—such as the innovative use of bicycles equipped with ceramic cisterns to deliver water to distant fields—reportedly surpassed the campaign's official targets, saving much of the harvest and more than doubling the total area under irrigation (BLTKT 1957, 11). Again, Hung Yen led all other provinces and the Government Council awarded the province an official pennant in July 1956 for its efforts to "fight drought." However, the methods used in Hung Yen, like those elsewhere, were not sustainable. Nor were they without problems, as evidenced by the overall decline in agricultural yields over the next several years (Nguyen Sinh Cuc 1995, 150).

Several factors contributed to this decline, but few more so than the land reforms (1953-1956) and the "Rectification of Errors" (1956-1958) campaign, which immediately followed. Broadly speaking, the former utilized class struggle to redistribute various types of private property in rural areas to millions of peasants who had little or none as a way to destroy existing mechanisms of socio-economic exploitation, while the latter sought to return some of the land, tools, animals, and personal belongings from those people able to prove these items had been wrongly seized from them (Moise 1983, 178-268). Both campaigns were thus highly contentious affairs since any effort to change who owned what pieces of property directly affected the ability of rural families to meet their subsistence needs as well as the size of their financial obligations to the Party/state, which were typically paid in paddy after each harvest.[9] As a consequence, both campaigns encouraged those involved in them to neglect a range of short-term

[9] For example, many rural households, "worried and fearful" (*lo so*) that their property rights would not be protected, preemptively cut down fruit trees, sold of draught animals, and sub-divided plots of land to generate short-term income. See Chỉ Thị của Ban Bí Thư số 48/CT-TƯ ngày 17 tháng 11 năm 1956 Về Việc Giữ Vững Trật Tự An Ninh ở Nông Thôn, Ngăn Ngừa Những Hành Động Tự Phát, Báo Thủ, Tạo Điều Kiện Thuận Lợi để Tiến Hành Việc Sửa Chữa Sai Lầm Về Cải Cách Ruộng Đất và Chính Đốn Tổ Chức.

concerns—such as existing initiatives to (re-) build dikes, canals, and other necessary irrigation infrastructure—in order to protect their long-term interests. The overall effect was the same in both instances: greater food insecurity from one harvest to the next. However, each campaign contributed to this outcome in different ways.

The land reforms, which officially began in some liberated areas in early 1953, unfolded unevenly across the countryside in a series of five waves, with many areas also undergoing multiple episodes of "land rent and interest rate reductions" (*giảm địa tô giảm tức*) as well as purges of Party members and administrative personnel whose class backgrounds, behavior, or personal relationships made them ideologically suspect in the eyes of others. Since many parts of the Left Bank Region, especially urban centers, remained under the nominal control of French-led military forces until the end of the First Indochina War in mid-1954, its residents only participated in the fifth and final wave, which officially began in December of 1955 and continued through July of 1956 (Moise 1983, 201-2).

It is, however, difficult to generalize about what occurred as local circumstances shaped when and how the land reforms were implemented different parts of the Left Bank Region. The mass campaign to end the drought, for example, delayed the start of the land reforms in many places, such as Hung Yen, which did not begin the process until late February of 1956, several weeks after the three-day effort to divert freshwater to the fields over the Lunar New Year festival. While the delay helped save the harvest, it dramatically reduced the time available to prepare cadres throughout the province much less ordinary peasants on the procedures to be used to carry out class struggle, to redistribute property, and to purge real and imagined "enemies" from local positions of authority (UBCCRDTU 1955, 26-35). The lack of preparation quickly proved to be a problem for the implementation of land reforms as many of the procedures were highly technical in nature and required a working knowledge of concepts drawn from Marxism, Leninism, and Maoism to fully understand. Moreover, instruction manuals provided to land reform cadres at the time stated the entire process normally required sixty-five days in each locale to complete. Yet, provincial authorities proudly announced in June that the land reforms had already been

successfully carried out in 149 of Hung Yen's communes (SVHTTHH 1995, 60), which suggests that the teams dispatched to the countryside carried out some or all of the "steps" in considerable haste.

An internal review conducted shortly after the June announcement reached the same conclusion. In it, authors of the report cited a vast array of "errors" (*sai lam*) that had occurred across much of the Left Bank Region and required immediate action to correct, as detailed in Resolution No. 380. Towards that end, regional authorities took steps to address them in August—several months before the Politburo authorized a similar process nationwide (Dang Phong 2005, 258). While these problems and the solutions proposed to resolve them deserve more discussion than can be devoted to them here, Resolution No. 380 directed much of the blame towards low-level cadres who reportedly made one of two fundamental errors: either they followed existing guidelines too "mechanically" (*mấy móc*) and thus failed to take local particularities into account or they disregarded them entirely and behaved in "arbitrary fashion" (*cá nhân độc đoán*).[10] Both errors, although quite different in nature, produced a similar result: false accusations. According to another internal review, in the Left Bank Region alone, 7,000 out of a total 8,828 Party members had been improperly "disciplined (*bị xử trí*)—a vague term that covered a range of different punishments from expulsion to torture and execution—as a consequence of such accusations (Dang Phong 2005, 87). While the full scale of the problem is not publicly known, aspects of them directly affected the mobilization and use of labor on construction sites, especially those related to irrigation.

For example, heavy rains returned in the fall of 1956, which meant the mass campaigns to end the drought had to abruptly shift their focus to flood prevention. This was again accomplished largely by hand using woven baskets suspended from tripods to manually scoop water, transferring it from lower-level fields to higher ones. But the above average rainfall meant that hundreds of thousands of peasants nationwide had to be re-mobilized to protect the Winter-Spring Harvest (1956-1957) by reinforcing dikes, berms, and other related infrastructure to divert excess water and thus protect the crops ripening in the fields. Unfortunately, the timing of this particular mass campaign conflicted with another one, the

[10] Nghị Quyết Hội Nghị Khu Ủy Tả Ngạn Mở Rộng số 380/NQ Năm 1956 Về Thực Hiện Công Tác Giảm Tô và Cải Cách Ruộng Đất.

"Rectification of Errors," which officially began in late October of 1956 and continued throughout 1957 and even into 1958 in some locations to address the problems the land reforms had created (Moise 1983, 237-268). During this period, teams of specially-trained cadres were sent to the countryside to restore public order. However, this too proved to be a difficult, time-consuming, and contentious process since the Party/state lacked the resources, ability, and political will to properly compensate the tens of thousands of people who lost their freedom, reputations, and property because they had been wrongly accused of a wide range of ideological and/or economic "crimes" (*tôi ác*).

The impact of the "Rectification of Errors" campaign on ongoing efforts to (re-) build irrigation works appears indirectly in the progress reports that low-level cadres submitted to their bureaucratic superiors. The details, which were converted into statistical tables, indicate that substantial amounts of labor were in fact devoted to irrigation works in the Left Bank Region during the land reforms with peasants moving more than 360,000 cubic meters of soil in Hung Yen alone between March and May of 1956. Reports filed afterwards, however, reveal that no officially *planned* work related was performed at the commune-level after this point, though some ad hoc efforts to protect the next harvest did take place locally (BTLKT 1957).[11]

This pattern was not limited to the Left Bank Region. Progress reports filed with the Ministry of Architecture and Irrigation also indicated a dramatic decline in the amount of conscripted labor provided across the DRV, especially on large-scale projects, during the height of the fifth and final wave of the land reforms. The decline was particularly significant, as the labor used to complete these projects—fourteen total (of which eight were new)—came from three main sources: some 11,000 cadres who had returned from the south after the 1954 Geneva Accords, nearly 6,000 underemployed day-laborers from nearby townships, and substantial numbers of conscripted peasants. In Inter-region III (Son Tay, Ha Nam, Ninh Binh, Ha Dong, and Nam Dinh Provinces) alone, for example, low-level cadres reportedly mobilized 102,999 peasants to provide *corvée* labor on such projects when work on them resumed in

[11] Bộ Thủy Lợi Kiến Trúc. 1957. Báo Cáo Bộ Thủy Lợi Kiến Trúc Phòng Quản Lý Công Trình và Cục Công Trình Thủy Lợi Về Công Tại Thủy Nông Đê Điều Năm 1956 (H.s. 61, v/v).

March of 1956. Interestingly, the cadres attributed their achievement to the "study sessions" peasants had participated in as part of the land reforms, which they claimed made the latter more aware of their "duty" to the Party/state—though they also admitted that some former landlords and other "class enemies" had been physically forced to work on the sites as punishment (BTLKT 1956, 2).[12]

Despite the number of people initially mobilized, their overall productivity was again much less than planned. Most of the cadres had held political or administrative posts in the south and found both the weather and the working conditions in the north extremely harsh as well as boring. (According to reports from Hải Dương, a neighboring province, only one in ten could withstand the work for any length in time.) Similar complaints were voiced by the day-laborers, many of whom had performed the same repetitive tasks, transporting soil and rocks, for two or more years and desperately desired employment in state-owned enterprises elsewhere (BTLKT 1956).

Peasants, although more accustomed to such intense labor, had complaints of their own, which they conveyed to inspectors who periodically visited the construction sites. Many peasants claimed not to have been conscripted in accordance with existing guidelines, a topic I examine in the next section. Working conditions, especially food, water, and medical care were also identified as inadequate as were efforts to raise literacy rates, which sought to improve not only peasants' ability to read official discourse, but to actually reproduce it in the form of verse, songs, short-stories, and plays (see, e.g.: BTHUBCCRDKTN 1956). But the most widespread complaint concerned the relationship of wages provided to the labor performed. In some cases, the relationship was arbitrary (varying on sites as well as across them); while in others it was reportedly due to the misuse of state funds, specifically embezzlement and profligate spending. Regardless of the cause, these problems were a source of considerable confusion and conflict, which the continued absence of official policies on compensation exacerbated further.

To address these problems, the Ministries of Labor, Finance, and Architecture and Irrigation concluded a joint agreement in March 1956 that established standardized regulations across the DRV

[12] Báo Cáo Tình Hinh Công Tác Đê Điều và Thủy Nông Đã Thực Hiện Trong Qui I của Liên Khu III (3/4/1956). In Bộ Thủy Lợi Kiên Trúc (Văn Phòng). Biên Bản Hội Nghị Kiểm Điểm Việc Thực Hiện Kế Hoạch Thủy Lợi và Kiến Trúc Trong 3 Tháng Đầu Năm 1956 (6/4/1956-10/4/1956) (H.s. 28, v/v).

regarding the use of wage labor on infrastructure projects. This development, while no doubt welcome, did little to convince peasants to remain on the construction sites as the final wave of the land reforms intensified (c. December 1955-July 1956). Not surprisingly, the number of peasants willing to leave their villages to perform their "duty" (i.e. *corvée* labor) at this particular time dropped precipitously and remained between thirty and eighty percent below normal levels for the remainder of the year (BTLTKT 1957b, 9-18).[13] Ironically, some of those who did go (particularly in Kim Dong, Van Giang, and Khoai Chau Districts of Hung Yen Province), stated that the physical labor was welcome change, as the ideological study-sessions they had been required to participate in as part of the land reforms were "exhausting" (BTLKT 1956, 3).[14] While it is likely that many peasants held similar views on this issue, comparatively few of them returned to construction sites after the land reforms ended in late 1956. In fact, the number peasants who provided labor on these sites remained far below what had been planned until early 1958 (BTLKT 1957, 6).[15] As the next section explains, several factors contributed to this outcome, but paradoxically none more so than the Party/state's own efforts to extended greater protections to volunteer, conscripted, and wage laborers on its construction sites.

Defending the People's Interests (1956-1957)

In April of 1956, one month after the national guidelines on compensation were announced, the Communist Party issued another set to its members, detailing the kinds of leadership and guidance they were to provide to low-level cadres in addition to conscripted laborers on the construction sites.[16] The document outlined which officials were responsible for ensuring the ideological, economic, and physical well-being of peasants performing *corvée* labor on such sites. Despite these efforts to clarify bureaucratic lines of responsibility, many of the same problems continued through 1957; indeed, they arguably

[13] Báo Cáo Tổng Kết Đại Thủy Nông 1956. In Ibid.
[14] Báo Cáo Tổng Kết Công Tác Chống Lụt, Chống Bão Năm Mùa Lũt Năm 1956 Số 36/BC Ban Chỉ Huy Chống Lụt Hưng Yên. In Bộ Thủy Lợi và Kiến Trúc (Quản Lý Công Trình). Báo Cáo của Ban Chỉ Huy Chống Lụt Hưng Yên, Hải Dương Về Công Tác Đê Điều, Chống Lụt, Bão Năm 1956 (28/5/1956-12/12/1956). (H.s. 74, v/v).
[15] Bộ Thủy Lợi và Kiến Trúc (Văn Phòng). Báo Cáo Tổng Kết 3 Năm Công Tác Thủy Lợi (1955-1957) Phục Vụ Kế Hoạch Phôi Phục Kinh Tế. In (H.s. 87, v/v/).
[16] Qui Đinh Về Công Tác Đảng Tại Các Công Trường (4/1956).

worsened, as evidenced by the three different policies issued in quick succession between July and September of that year.

The first, Decree No. 339, based on the suggestions provided by the Ministry of Labor, sought to better protect the "people's interests" through temporary regulations on the "mobilization and use of conscripted labor during peacetime construction."[17] At first glance, the nine-page decree appears unsurprising, as its contents provide expected details on who was eligible for conscription (nearly all able-bodied adults who did not hold official posts) and defined the standard length of service (nine hours per day for thirty days, with one rest day for every nine worked). The decree also set fixed rates of pay for the different types of skilled and unskilled labor performed (between 600-1,000 VND/day) and determined what forms of compensation were appropriate for those who fell ill or were injured on site.

But two of the details, in particular, stand out. The first concerned travel subsidies, which specified the amount provided and rest-periods permitted for conscripted laborers who had to travel between 11-15, 16-30, and 31-45 kilometers, respectively, to reach a given construction site. Since irrigation projects (unlike road construction in remote areas) were located close to densely populated rural areas, peasants rarely traveled great distances to reach the sites. However, their relative proximity meant that peasants were also expected to walk to and from construction sites on a daily basis, which placed an additional burden on their already limited labor-time. The second clarified internal lines of authority. According to the decree, low-level cadres were no longer authorized to requisition *corvée* without the prior written approval of their superiors; moreover, the text expressly limited their duties to four tasks: the dissemination of policies; the organization of labor on site; its management; and regular progress reports on each. To help reinforce this division of labor, the decree further announced the creation of "command committees" (*ban chỉ huy*) to help ensure that the temporary guidelines it contained were followed appropriately and implemented in a timely fashion on all construction sites.

[17] Nghị Định của Thủ Tướng Chính Phủ 339-TTg Ngày 27 Tháng 7 Năm 1957 Ban Hành Bản Điều Lệ Tạm Thời Về Huy Động Và Sử Dụng Dân Công Trong Thời Kỳ Kiến Thiết Hòa Bình.

Of course, the decree can also be read "against the grain" (Benjamin 1999, 248), which would suggest that the temporary regulations did not reflect existing practice so much as a concerted effort by high-ranking officials to reassert their authority over low-ranking ones by standardizing procedural norms. Two items in the text of the decree lend credence to such an interpretation. The decree exhorted local cadres not to mobilize *corvée* during critical moments in the agricultural cycle, as this could adversely affect the ability of peasants to feed themselves in the future. It also warned these same cadres not to rely upon "Commandism" (*chủ nghĩa mệnh lệnh*) to mobilize others since threats and intimidation would gradually undermine respect for officials and compliance with the policies they sought to implement (see also BLLNDTQ 1956, 7).

Such a counter-reading finds further support in the two circulars the Ministry of Labor promulgated in September, less than two months later. The first, Circular No. 17, provided additional information regarding how the temporary regulations set out in Decree No. 339 should be properly implemented.[18] The details, which covered thirteen pages, are too complex to fully relate here; however, the lengthy explanation of what tasks did and did not qualify as *corvée*, which tools laborers were required to bring to the site and which would be provided for them, and so on suggest that previous policies had failed to fully resolve disagreements over where the obligations of conscripted laborers *to* the Party/state ended and the responsibilities of its representatives *to* those who performed it began. The content of Circular No. 18, issued shortly afterwards, also emphasized this point, albeit indirectly.[19] It detailed what kinds of infrastructure and services low-level cadres had to put in place in order to make conditions at construction sites both safer and more hygienic than they were currently. This included ten pages of guidelines on latrines, on-site medical care, and compensation rates for work-related injuries and deaths, which again suggests that central-level agencies had neglected to establish minimal standards prior to this point.

[18] Thông Tư của Bộ Lao Động Số 17/TT-DC Ngày 12 Tháng 9 Năm 1957 Giải Thích Việc Thi Hành Bản Điều Lệ Tạm Thời Về Huy Động và Sử Dụng Dân Công Trong Thời Hòa Bình Kiến Thiết.
[19] Thông Tư của Liên Bộ Lao Động, Tài Chính, Y Tế, Thủy Lợi và Kiến Trúc, Giao Thông và Bưu Điện Số 18-TT-LB Ngày 23 Tháng 9 Năm 1957 Quy Định Chi Tiết Các Quyền Lợi của Dân Công Đã Được Ghi Trong Điều Lệ Số 339-TTG Ngày 27 Tháng 7 Năm 1957.

Efforts to standardize the practices used on construction sites also occurred at the regional and provincial levels. Since these decisions were not always in complete alignment with central-level ones—indeed they often preceded as well as deviated from them—attention to these dynamics can provide insights into actually existing government in particular times and places. Such dynamics clearly evident in the Left Bank Region where the "Rectification of Errors" campaign badly disrupted nearly every aspect of daily life owing to the immense amount of time and energy it consumed. Indeed, the problems the land reforms had created proved to be so complex that different segments of the Party/state issued at least eleven major policy statements during the first four months of the "Rectification of Errors" campaign in the effort to define and then refine what procedures cadres should use to restore public order, to identify and release victims of false accusations from makeshift prisons, to re-categorize those who had received the wrong "class fraction," to resolve property disputes, and so on (VTTP 1957a).[20] These initial, largely ad hoc efforts became better organized and standardized over time (VTTP 1957b; Moise 1983, 237-268); however, they failed to convince rural populations to carry out other essential tasks, such as paying their Winter-Spring Harvest taxes on time, a feat only 211 out of a total of 804 communes in the Left Bank Region managed that year.[21]

Non-compliance was not limited to agricultural taxes. The number of peasants willing to perform their "duty," i.e. conscripted labor, in the Left Bank Region during the height of the "Rectification of Errors" campaign also plummeted from a total of 24,973,250 work days in 1956 to a mere 6,035,760 in 1957 (BTLKT, 1957, 6). Since such work was crucial to the region's food security, Tran Dang Chap, the Director of the Ministry of Labor in the Left Bank Region, issued eight circulars between March and July 1957 that outlined a range of material incentives and organizational reforms he hoped would encourage

[20] In Marxist-inspired social theory, class categories are typically used to describe the domination of one group by another (e.g. the exploitation of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie), whereas class fractions help distinguish small, but important social, cultural, and economic differences within them (e.g. rich, middle, poor, and landless peasants).
[21] Nghị Quyết của Ban Thương Vụ Khu Tả Ngạn Số 15-NQ Ngày 2 Tháng 3 Năm 1957 Về Vấn Đề Hoàn Thành Sửa Điền Sản và Thu Thuế Nông Nghiệp của Khu Tả Ngạn. This problem was not limited to the Left Bank Region. See, Chỉ Thị của Ban Bí Thư Số 29-CT-TƯ Ngày 1 Tháng 6 Năm 1957 Về Việc Ngăn Chặn và Giải Quyết Các Vụ Tranh Chấp Tài Sản.

peasants to once again provide corveé labor when needed (UBHCKTN 1957).[22] Tran Dang Chap first raised the wages paid to conscripted peasants in March to correspond to market prices so that corvée would no longer make poor peasants poorer. The following month he also authorized the creation of hierarchically-nested public works brigades (*đôi*), closely modeled after those used to supply military campaigns during the First Indochina War (Pham Luan 1966), to more effectively and efficiently utilize available manpower (MacLean 2007, 57).

This innovation was accompanied by a public awareness campaign that he ordered low-level cadres to carry out in their respective locales. Its purpose was to correct widespread misperceptions regarding *corvée* labor, to disseminate information on current policies, and so on. This required these cadres to accomplish a difficult task: low-level cadres were expected to explain what provisions had been added to protect the "individual rights" of peasants, yet convince them that it was still their "duty" to temporarily abandon their homes and fields to provide *corvée* when requested.[23] To make this task easier, Tran Dang Chap further recommended that the Ministry of Finance coordinate with state-owned rice companies and warehouses to pay conscripted laborers the equivalent of 1.5 kilos of paddy or 500 VND per day, depending on their stated preference.[24]

It is not clear whether the recommendation was ever approved; but, other documents indicate that cadres throughout the Left Bank Region did not wait for central-level authorities to offer material incentives. These details emerged as part of a three-month inspection that officials from the Ministry of Labor carried out in the Left Bank Region between mid-July and mid-October of 1957 (UBHCKTN 1957).[25] In the lengthy report that followed, the officials described a wide-range of "short-comings." Some of these were attributed to the "Rectification of Errors" campaign, which they noted had produced

[22] Thông Tư của Ủy Ban Hành Chính Khu Tả Ngạn và Tài Liệu, Công Văn của Khu Lao Động Tả Ngạn Về Tổ Chức và Giáo Dục Về Chính Sách Dân Công Năm 1957 (30/3/1957-18/7/19757). (H.s. 26/413, v/v).
[23] Thông Tư Số 10/LĐ-NL Ty Góp Ý Kiến v/v Huy Động Dân Công và Giải Quyết Một Số Mắc Mưu Về Chính Sách Dân Công (10/4/1957). In Thông Tư của Ủy Ban Hành Chính Khu Tả Ngạn và Tài Liệu, Công Văn của Khu Lao Động Tả Ngạn Về Tổ Chức và Giáo Dục Về Chính Sách Dân Công Năm 1957 (30/3/1957-18/7/1957). (H.s. 26/413, v/v).
[24] Thông Tư Số 11/LĐ-NL Vụ Công Ty Lượng Thực và Kho Thóc của Bộ Tài Chính Sử Dụng Nhân Lực (24/4/1957). Ibid.
[25] Ủy Ban Hành Chính Khu Tả Ngạn (Khu Lao Động). Báo Cáo của Khu Lao Động Tả Ngạn Về Công Tác Kiểm Tra và Một Số Kinh Nghiệm Về Công Tác Thanh Tra Năm 1957 (12/7/1957-13/10/1957). (H.s. 32, v/v).

"ideological instabilities" across the countryside. The particular forms these "instabilities" took were not identified in this report. However, other documents issued at the time noted widespread fears among peasants that efforts to correct past "errors" would result in new ones. The three most commonly cited were: a change in their current "class fraction" to a politically less desirable one; the loss of some or all of the property acquired during previous waves of the land reforms; and/or personal injury at the hands of those who had been wrongly punished for crimes they did not commit and now sought vengeance (TT 1958).[26]

These fears had a number of immediate effects. First, the immense amount of time and energy devoted to "Rectification of Errors" campaign contributed to a sharp drop in food production—per capita yields in 1957 were more than forty kilograms lower than those the year before (Nguyen Sinh Cuc 1995, 150). Second, this decline also prompted the Prime Minister's Office to call on officials in Hanoi and Haiphong to encourage and, where necessary, force people who had sought refuge in the cities during the land reforms to return to the countryside to help raise agricultural yields (TT 1957).[27] Third, local officials in the Left Bank Region also acknowledged a dramatic decline in the number of peasants who had reported to construction sites to perform their "duty." The daily average was a mere 6-7,000 laborers instead of the 14-20,000 actually needed; consequently, the total volume of soil moved, 488,000 cubic meters out of the 671,604 targeted, was approximately one-third less than originally planned (UBHCKTN 1957).

Interestingly, the authors of the report did not attribute the entire problem to the "Rectification of Errors" campaign; instead, they insisted that low-level cadres were primarily to blame, as a majority of them purportedly lacked sufficient "prestige" (*uy tin*) to mobilize others. This problem, the report continued, was made worse by their provincial- and district-level counterparts, who had organized "study-

[26] Thông Tư của Thủ Tướng Chính Phủ Số 350/TTg, Ngày 9 Tháng 7 Năm 1958 Quy Định Nhiệm Vụ của Dân Quân trong Công Tác Giữ Gìn Trật Tự An Ninh, Bảo Vệ Kinh Tế và Tài Sản Công Cộng của Nhà Nước ở Nông Thôn; Chỉ Thị của Ban Bí Thư Số 29-CT-TƯ Ngày 1 Tháng 6 Năm 1957 Về Việc Ngăn Chặn và Giải Quyết Các Vụ Tranh Chấp Tài Sản.

[27] Thông Tư của Thủ Tướng Chính Phủ Số 495/TTg, Ngày 23 Tháng 10 Năm 1957, Về Việc Hạn Chế Đồng Bào ở Nông Thôn Ra Thành Phố.

sessions" to disseminate information regarding the eight circulars, but only in a few locations; consequently, general awareness of these policies and the broader political, social, and economic goals to which they were linked remained scattered and uneven. This was particularly the case in two provinces, Hung Yen and Hai Duong, where inspection teams found that at least five different forms of contract-based wage labor had emerged, including several which deviated sharply from central-level policies and were later suppressed (UBHCKTN 1957, 1-2; MacLean 2007, 51-56).

Rethinking Transition (1958-1959)

Field reports low-level cadres submitted to different ministries during the "Rectification of Errors" campaign indicate these and other "short-comings" were not limited to the Left Bank Region, but instead affected (re-) construction efforts throughout the DRV, most obviously the total volume of earth and rock moved, which declined dramatically despite heavy capital investments in this sector.

Table 2: Labor Contributions and Investment in Irrigation Works (1955-1960)

Year	Earth (cubic meters)	Rock (cubic meters)	Concrete (cubic meters)	Capital (1,000 VND)
1955	14,224,176	256,885	3,287	9,924
1956	18,222,423	220,017	7,554	15,510
1957	3,889,723	162,071	10,028	10,134
1958	5,538,428	234,457	5,674	12,224
1959	15,164,757	168,146	1,507	10,079
1960	14,381,445	128,240	2,188	9,246

Source: n.a. (1994, 184).

Efforts to reverse this overall decline in labor contributions took several forms both during and immediately after the "Rectification of Errors" campaign; they did not, however, reflect a significant change in "government," i.e. the methods used to mobilize and manage voluntary, paid, and conscripted labor on irrigation works. Instead, the policies issued, particularly those related to the second Three-Year Plan (1958-1960), signaled their intensification.

Rot again destroyed a significant portion of the Winter-Spring harvest (1957-1958) across the DRV. This was followed by a drought that lasted much of the year, with Hung Yen Province reportedly

among the worst affected areas (Quang Tuynh 1962, 5). In the midst of these natural disasters, the Ministry of Architecture and Irrigation held a large conference in Hung Yen with some 2,500 of its cadres in attendance along with high-ranking Party members and selected "labor heroes." Ho Chi Minh opened the July conference and awarded representatives from Van Lam District with an honorary flag in recognition of their mass campaign to "fight drought," while the province's Youth Union received a certificate of achievement as well. Afterward, Ho Chi Minh inspected construction sites in a nearby commune. Such trips—he made three more to Hung Yen that fall—marked renewed support for a massive irrigation scheme, first proposed in 1956 and then designed with the help of Chinese advisors. "Doing this project," Ho Chi Minh stated during an inspection trip to Hung Yen, "will enable [our] prosperity in perpetuity" (SVHTTHH 1995, 62). The scheme, later known as the Bac-Hung-Hai Project, helped achieve this ambitious goal by providing freshwater to the three provinces it eventually irrigated (Bac Ninh, Hung Yen, and Hai Duong), dramatically improving food security in the process (MacLean 2007).

While it was a notable achievement, the decision to build this project also exemplified the broader turn towards technocratic solutions to development "problems." The emphasis on scientific forms of management quickly became a defining feature of the centrally planned economy then taking shape in the DRV, especially in the agricultural sector where the first cohort of technocrats argued that an increase in scale, made possible through the gradual collectivization of the means of production, would result in a concomitant increase in yields. While this model was eventually abandoned, the assumptions that informed it had two important effects on how labor was mobilized and to what ends it was put on the eve of collectivization.

The first was renewed emphasis on peasant self-reliance, which officials in the Ministry of Irrigation announced at a conference in October of 1958, just as the first stage of construction on the Bac-Hung-Hai Project began. The policy shift, commonly known as the "Three Principles" (*ba chính*), transferred all of the organizational responsibility as well as much of the cost of construction and maintenance of small-scale irrigation works to peasants themselves. The stated goal of this shift was to

force rural populations to assume greater responsibility for their own material well-being and thus rely less upon assistance from the Party/state, which would enable its engineers to concentrate on the completion of large-scale systems (Phan Khanh 1997). This message was reinforced with poems, short-stories, and easy-to-follow instruction manuals that used hand-drawn diagrams to illustrate how to reinforce dikes, reinforce the earthen walls of canals with woven bamboo, and so on. It also appeared to work.

The Ministry of Labor reported a tremendous increase in local contributions (see Table 3), including in Hung Yen Province where peasants sought to connect their fields to the Cau Canal. Eventually completed in late 1960, the canal and its side channels supplied fresh water to the entire province as well as parts of Hai Duong and Bac Ninh. As part of this effort, conscripted peasants in Hung Yen provided 16,198,000 workdays over a three-year period, during which they reportedly dug and dredged 19,309,000 cubic meters of earth to help (re-) build 6,701 large-, medium-, and small-scale irrigation works. When added together, these stretched 3,219 kilometers. Over this same period, peasants in Hung Yen also voluntarily devoted 1,049,000 more workdays to move 1,668,000 cubic meters of earth as part of seasonal campaigns to reinforce existing dikes, sluices, drainage canals, and so on (Quang Tuynh 1962, 10; Quoc Phuong 1964, 13-20). The statistics, assuming they reflect labor actually performed, are astonishing; they also underscore the extent to which the ability to mobilize huge numbers of peasants remained a crucial component of official efforts to quite literally "build socialism" in the countryside during these years.

The second was renewed support for the "mutual assistance teams" (*tổ đổi công*) among state planners, who asserted that working collectively would raise agricultural yields more rapidly than working individually. The most basic form was known as an "intermittent work exchange group," which mimicked the informal quid pro quo arrangements rural households commonly used during the pre-revolutionary era. Typically, such exchanges were organized around the most labor intensive activities associated with the agricultural production cycle: plowing, transplanting, weeding, and harvesting crops. These ad hoc arrangements were to be replaced with "regular labor exchange groups" that would, in

principle, carry out a much wider array of production-related activities on a routine basis throughout the year, which required the semi-collectivization of draught animals, tools, and so on. Advanced labor exchange groups," the precursor to low-level agricultural co-operatives, were to take this process one step further by introducing "work points" as a means to quantitatively measure each person's labor contributions in addition to the full collectivization of all property (Tran Duc 1994, 75). In theory, each successive form provided a sufficient number of social and material incentives to households participating in them to voluntarily proceed to the next stage of collectivization where the rewards were portrayed to be even larger. For these reasons official histories typically describe the late 1950s as an important transitional moment in which the tier-like organizational structure of the mutual aid teams provided the "foundation" for the shift from private forms of agricultural production to collective ones (MacLean 2005, 133-186).

Such an interpretation is problematic for several reasons. Among other things, it obscures the fact this process did not occur in an orderly or sequential fashion; quite the contrary, as official statistics reveal that total membership in the mutual assistance teams fluctuated dramatically between late 1956, when the land reforms ended, and late 1959, when collectivization officially began. The reasons for these fluctuations are not yet fully understood; but, it now seems clear the "Rectification of Errors" campaign was one. In the Left Bank Region, for example, the first teams were not formed until after the campaign ended there in late 1957 and, despite the official support for them, participation rates remained surprisingly low: a mere twenty-seven percent (n.a. 1958, 29).[28] Average rates elsewhere in the DRV, however, were even lower.

Table 3: Total Membership in Mutual Aid Teams (All Types)

Membership	End 1955	End 1956	Mid 1957	End 1957	End 1958	April 1959	End 1959
No. of Rural Households	153,000	190,200	72,000	100,900	244,400	249,025	97,600
Avg. No. of	7.1	7.1	n/a	5.9	7.3	n/a	10.6

[28] Dưới Sự Lãnh Đạo của Đảng Lao Động Việt Nam. Nông Dân Tả Ngạn Quyết Tâm Tiến Mạnh Trên Côn Đường Đổi Công Hợp Tác (Tài Liệu Học Tập của Ban Chấp Hành Nông Hội Xã và Các Tổ Trưởng Đổi Công, Nông Hội) (n.a.: HTX Ấn Loát Đoàn Kết, 1958).

Households / Group							
% of Rural Households	40	50	19	22	66	69	38

Source: Kerkvliet (1999, 83-84).

The coercive tactics low-level cadres often used to pressure peasants to join the teams likely did not help matters. Nor did the problems peasants personally encountered once on them, which led many to conclude that the actual costs of collective forms of production outweighed the promised benefits (Kerkvliet 1999, 58-63).

While these inter-personal dynamics undoubtedly played a crucial role, the statistical patterns suggest why the fluctuations in membership rates on the eve of collectivization cannot be reduced to either mistrust arising from previous waves of class struggle or the forms of domination and resistance reportedly found on the mutual aid teams themselves. The broader context also mattered, as the Party/state dramatically reversed its position on the desirability of private property within the space of only a few years. During the land reforms, the redistribution of private property to those with little or none was officially touted as a way to eradicate a number of problems—most obviously, the inter-locking forms of exploitation that contributed to chronic hunger, abject poverty, and landlessness in the countryside. However, the "solution" to these problems failed to end them; instead, their sudden and unexpected reemergence shortly after the land reforms prompted a new series of policy interventions, the mutual assistance teams among them, which were intended to prevent further socio-economic differentiation through the gradual collectivization of the means of production in rural areas. This began with peasant labor, which I previously noted is a form of property in addition to being productive of it, and later expanded to include all arable land, animals, and tools (MacLean 2005, 190-192). Not surprisingly, this reversal on private property, generated significant confusion, anxiety, and disillusionment in the countryside because it asked for and, following collectivization, required rural families to place much of their food security in the hands of others.

These problems were further compounded by the heavy and frequently conflicting demands different segments of the Party/state placed upon peasants whose finite labor-time was continually taken

up by a seemingly infinite number of mass campaigns. Indeed, when these factors are taken together, the rapid rise and fall of membership rates in these groups not only becomes much clearer, it also takes on broader significance. The redistribution of property, a key feature of the land reforms, dramatically reduced disparities in the average amount different "class fractions" owned (Moise 1983, 208-209)—but only momentarily.

In the Left Bank Region, the disparities that previously existed across the three poorest fractions—former "landless" peasants (1,442 m2), "land poor" peasants (1,440 m2), and "middle" peasants (1,452 m2), respectively (BCHNHX 1958, 7)—virtually disappeared. However, high population densities in the Left Bank Region meant that these amounts—less than one-fifth of a hectare (10,000 m2)—were rarely sufficient for rural families to meet their subsistence needs even under the best of circumstances, much less reliably accumulate food surpluses year after year. Owing to these material constraints, official efforts to build a new society in the countryside ironically contributed to the re-emergence of the very problem the land reforms were thought to have eradicated: rapid class differentiation.

Usury, tenant-farming, and other forms of socio-economic exploitation reappeared shortly after the land reforms were halted in late 1956. At the time, these practices were commonly portrayed in official publications as "vestiges" of feudalism and capitalism that would disappear over time (Tran Phuong 1960). This assessment, while not altogether inaccurate, nonetheless obscures the role the Party/state played in the proliferation of such exploitative practices. The relevant ministries, for example, did not authorize any large-scale programs to provide agricultural extension services or to improve access to formal credit to peasants following the land reforms; so, most peasants continued to farm as they had beforehand and to borrow money informally at high interest rates whenever circumstances required it. Consequently, the mass emulation campaigns, although directed towards a range of official ends, inadvertently placed a tremendous additional burden on rural families. This was because the constant appropriation of one form of property—their labor—as part of these campaigns increased their economic

vulnerability, which made the loss of another—their land—far more likely when confronted with a failed harvest, illness, or other untoward event.

Some of those who had to sell part or all of their land to cover debts appear to have become day-laborers for wealthier peasants and contract-workers on construction sites, whereas others clearly opted to pool their meager resources and enter the growing number of experimental cooperatives (n.a. 1989, 29). However, as the table above indicates, the vast majority of rural households appear to have joined and abandoned the mutual aid teams from one season to the next depending on their actual resources and the perceived risks of continuing to labor either "individually" (*làm ăn cá thể*) or "collectively" (*làm ăn tập thể*). For these reasons, most peasants did not experience a gradual or well-coordinated shift from a system where the relations of production were primarily organized around individual property rights to another that was organized around collective ones; instead, rural populations utilized a range of livelihood strategies—a tactic that the diverse array of private, semi-private/semi-collective, and collective property arrangements then still in existence made possible (MacLean 2005, 133-201)—to survive the continual appropriation of their labor-time by representatives of the Party/state for official ends that may or may not have aligned with their own.

The impacts these dynamics had upon the "transition" into state socialism were significant and multi-faceted. Here, however, I summarize two of them, as they illustrate why existing accounts of this process need revision. First, close attention to the institutional arrangements that emerged between late 1956 and late 1959 to mobilize and to manage large numbers of peasants involved in mass campaigns to (re-) build essential infrastructure led the bundles of rights and obligations associated with the different labor regimes used on them to become increasingly "fuzzy." In other words, official efforts to make volunteer, conscripted, and wage labor more "legible" and thus amenable to bureaucratic administration tended to have the opposite effect (cf. Scott 1998); they did so because other mass campaigns—most notably the land reforms (1953-1956) and the "Rectification of Errors" (1956-1958) that followed—radically transformed some aspects of life in rural areas, left others intact, and reconfigured still others.

Second, since these campaigns frequently overlapped in time and space, the competition for peasant bodies inevitably generated significant confusion and conflict, both "inside" and "outside" the Party/state, in addition to serious labor shortages. As a consequence, existing accounts of the "transition" into state socialism also need to be rethought since official efforts to "restore" the DRV's economy through the mass mobilization of peasants clearly contributed to the very socio-economic problems the Party/state had set out to eradicate—namely: increased exploitation, hunger, poverty, and landlessness. When these outcomes, which were neither planned nor desired, are taken into account, the Party/state's decision to fully collectivize agricultural production in late 1959 appears to have less to do with historical inevitability than a range of social, political, and economic contradictions, many of which arising from disagreements over the proper meaning, value, and purpose of peasant labor.

Conclusion

In the end, what should we make of these fragmentary accounts of "sabotage" that occurred in the Left Bank Region, especially as the definition of who these "enemies" were changed considerably within only a brief amount of time? And what, if anything, do these accusations and the official actions cadres purportedly took in response to them reveal about a concern that informs them both—namely, the conflicts and confusion created by the existence of multiple property regimes that defined and allocated ownership, administrative, and use rights quite differently. Some tentative conclusions follow.

The descriptions of "sabotage" circulated in a context where power relations had just been forcibly reversed, but the new order of things not yet consolidated. Interestingly, many of the acts of "sabotage" described in the field reports did not disappear following collectivization (Kerkvliet 2005; MacLean 2005, 202-332). Among other things, this suggests that ideologically suspect forms of behavior exhibited significant continuities across time as well as radical reconfigurations in property relations. As I have noted elsewhere, this raises a number of difficult questions concerning the dynamics of domination and resistance in both settings. For example, how do conventional understanding of subaltern politics

need to shift when it is former "feudal" and "colonial" elites who are denounced as "class enemies" and then thrust into positions of socio-economic subordination? And what impact does this process have upon the politics of representation and the kinds of traces this leaves within official documents in a context where "subaltern-speak," i.e. stylized accounts of peasant suffering and resistance to these "enemies," informs the very language representatives of the Party/state use to formulate and implement policies (Hershatter 1993)?

Both questions are further complicated by a third. Are all forms of resistance are necessarily political in nature? If not, then how much intentionality, coherence, and directionality do disparate acts need to demonstrate over time to qualify as everyday resistance to one's domination by others? Or might not a more not a more neutral term, such as "non-compliance," often be more appropriate since it conveys a failure or refusal to cooperate, but not necessarily a coordinated strategy to disrupt, subvert, or even overthrow the existing order of things? In other words, when do the various forms of "sabotage" described in the field reports actually constitute "counter-revolutionary" resistance to the Party/state? And when do they instead signal an individual's anger with vague and conflicting policies, the behavior of abusive cadres, and the immense demands different mass campaigns made upon the labor-time of those who participated in them—all of which affected the ability of rural households to satisfy their own subsistence needs in the face of heavy taxes and the annual cycle of floods, rot, and drought.

Unfortunately, it is not possible to arrive at definitive answers to these questions, as archival access to relevant documents remains sharply circumscribed and the number of people who lived through this period continues to rapidly decline over time. But as the range and seriousness of the "short-comings" documented in the field reports indirectly suggests, many of the acts of "sabotage" mentioned probably reflected economic rather than political discontentment with conditions in a particular time and place. If true, then this would help explain why total membership in the mutual aid teams, which typically attracted the poorest households (i.e. former *bần cố nông*), fluctuated so dramatically between late 1956 and late 1959. The continued existence of multiple property regimes made it possible for tens of thousands of rural households to repeatedly move back and forth between private and collective forms of production as their

economic circumstances changed from season to season. So while the definition of ownership, administrative, and use rights may have been relatively clear in the case of each regime, peasant commitment to both of them was often, to use Verdery's term, "fuzzy" at best. Hence, the need to critically reexamine the assumptions that inform existing accounts of the "transition" towards state socialism on the eve of collectivization.

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