



“MOONSHINERS, BLACK MARKETERS, AND THIEVES AMONG US”: ECONOMIC CRIME IN WARTIME NORTH VIETNAM

HARISH MEHTA

PRESIDENT HO CHI MINH (1890–1969) often worried that widespread corruption was sabotaging the struggle to build the new nation of the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam (DRV or North Vietnam) he had founded as an independent state in 1945.¹ During the 1940s, corruption threatened to throw off the rails the economic reforms to strengthen the north at a particularly grueling time when Ho and the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP or the *Dang Cong San Dong Duong*) were devising ways to fight French colonizers who had tightened control over the country. Decades later, in the 1960s and 1970s, DRV officials still feared corruption was destabilizing not only wartime economic policy, but also the national resolve to fight a long war of resistance against the United States.

Many peasants disobeyed the government’s rationing policy forbidding the “extravagant” consumption of rice and other foods, and they flouted the ban on the production of rice wine. They clandestinely transported their produce to the black market, hiding rice wine inside balloons, while “peanut smugglers” carried their peanuts concealed ingeniously within ornate mandolin cases, inside pumpkins, and hidden in women’s turbans. The state banned excessive consumption and private trade because it aimed to purchase the food at below

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1. Ho Chi Minh, “To the People’s Committees of the North, Central, and South Vietnam, to the People’s Committees of Provinces, Districts, and Villages,” in Ho Chi Minh, *Selected Articles and Speeches*, Moscow: Progress, 1959, 174–6.

market price in order to redistribute to the masses. Some peasants, however, collaborated with errant officials to break the law. Throughout, it appears, the state had limited success in rooting out economic crime despite putting in place regulations, reform campaigns, and relentless surveillance of the people.

President Ho warned officials at the provincial, district, and village levels in October 1945 not to abuse their power, as the French had done before them.² In his ideological book, *Rectification of Bad Working Habits*, published the following year, Ho listed a few “bad habits” afflicting state administrators during French colonial rule: “corruption, nepotism, sycophancy towards superiors, arrogance towards inferiors,” and “mandarin” attitudes towards the people.³ Such colonial-era behaviors were commonly exhibited by many officials who governed the newly created DRV. Temporarily, and partially, eradicated as a result of self-improvement campaigns, the aberrations reappeared soon afterwards, causing Ho and his colleagues to periodically deliver stern admonitions. Ho warned the cadres of the Vietnam Workers’ Party (VWP or *Dang Lao Dong Viet Nam*) in 1947 that they should not become “new mandarins,” chiding them that “the Party is not an organization to be used as a mandarin would to line his nest,” and urging them to develop “revolutionary ethics.”⁴ To eradicate these shortcomings, the DRV conducted a series of “thought-reform” campaigns running from 1946 to 1954 that exhorted people to adhere to the Party line and reject French cultural influences such as “idealism, skepticism, romanticism, individualism, and the Western idea of art for art’s sake.”⁵

To combat French colonial forces, the Vietnamese revolutionaries conducted a restructuring of their assorted parties and resistance groups, bringing them under a united front. This process had begun with the dissolution of the ICP in 1945 and the absorption of its activities by the predominant communist independence front, the Viet Minh, founded in 1941. The communist VWP was formally launched at the Second Congress of the Party in 1951 to carry forward the unfinished task of seeking independence begun by the Vietnamese Communist Party in 1930, and continued by the Viet Minh. At this Party

2. Ibid.

3. XYZ [penname used by Ho Chi Minh], *Sua Doi Loi Lam Viec* [literally, “*Modify the Style of Work*”], Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Su That [from here: NXBST], 1946.

4. Ho Chi Minh, *Ho Chi Minh Toan Tap: 1945–47, Tap 4*, [*Ho Chi Minh’s Complete Works: 1945–1947*, from here: HCMTT, vol. 4], Hanoi: NXBST, 1984, 463.

5. Hoang Van Chi, *From Colonialism to Communism: A Case History of North Vietnam*, New York: Praeger, 1964, 112.

Congress, the Lien Viet Front—created in 1946 by grouping communist organizations, unions of women and youth, and even two right-wing bourgeoisie nationalist parties that remained within the front for a short period—merged with the overtly communist Viet Minh in order to win wider support from non-communists within Vietnam for the liberation struggle.⁶

Already before the Second World War, Ho Chi Minh began mobilizing his forces against French colonial rule in Vietnam, which started when France conquered Indochina in 1887. The Vietnamese resistance received a setback with Japan's invasion of French Indochina during the Second World War, and Ho had to struggle to drive both the French and the Japanese from Vietnam. After Japan's defeat by the Western Allies, Ho announced the creation of the independent DRV in September 1945. The United States refused to recognize his government and assisted France's effort to resume control over the country. Vietnamese forces, then, fought the First Indochina War against France (1946–1954), ending in French defeat in 1954. Washington, however, refused to sign or honor the Geneva Agreements which concluded the First Indochina War, and instead sponsored the dictator Ngo Dinh Diem (1901–63) as the leader of South Vietnam.

The North Vietnamese responded by waging both a military and diplomatic offensive to expel US forces from the south. In the midst of the Second Indochina War, also known as the Vietnam War (from the late 1950s to 1975), the Hanoi leadership formally adopted the diplomatic front strategy in 1967 because they realized that they could not defeat the United States militarily, and that diplomacy offered a chance of ending the war. In early 1968, meanwhile, the North Vietnamese did exhibit their military power by launching the Tet Offensive, a series of surprise military attacks against US and South Vietnamese military forces. It belied the US military's claim that it was making good progress in the war, and paved the way to peace talks. Although the United States and North Vietnam signed a peace accord in 1973 in Paris, the North Vietnamese continued to press the military advantage until their forces swept the US-backed Saigon regime from power in 1975.

This article presents new evidence from multiple Vietnamese archival sources and materials from US repositories, spanning a three-decade-long trajectory of economic crime and punishment from the mid-1940s to the mid-1970s. It employs the papers of the DRV National Assembly and Supreme Court reports

6. William J. Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam*, Boulder, CO: Westview, 1981, 143.

housed at National Archives Center No. 3 in Hanoi as well as Vietnamese-language journals and books. The study uses reports of US officials who kept a close eye on the North Vietnamese economy. Such reports are contained in the presidential archives of Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon and the papers of National Security Adviser and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, Special Assistant for National Security Affairs Walt Whitman Rostow, and declassified Central Intelligence Agency and United States Information Agency reports. Scholars, for their part, have written extensively on the North Vietnamese economy and the land reform program, but they have made only brief references to economic crime.

Offenses of all types spiraled out of control as regulation created resistance, and more regulation produced even more resistance. For instance, the number of jail sentences ranging from 10 to 20 years increased by 79 per cent in 1974 over the previous year.⁷ The law targeted both ordinary people and cadres without discrimination. For a crime committed by a cadre as serious as pilfering large amounts of coal, the penalty was a mere five or six months' imprisonment. Afterwards, the jailed coal official was brought back to his place of work, but was demoted to the position of an ordinary worker.⁸

The problem of corruption appeared early in the DRV when the Viet Minh began fighting French forces in 1946. A campaign against graft reorganized local governments under Presidential Decree No. 254, issued on 19 November 1948.⁹ In addition to vesting local authorities with vast executive and administrative powers, the decree extended extraordinary judicial and police powers.

7. *Ho So Ky Hop Thu Nam Cua QH Khoa IV Tu Ngay 23–28/12/1974, Tap 3: Phien Hop Ngay 24/12/1975, Bao Cao Cua HDCP, UBTVQH, TANDTC, VKSNDTC Ve Tinh Hinh Dau Tranh Thi Hanh Hiep Dinh Pari, Tinh Hinh Quan Su, Cong Tac Toa, An Va Kiem Rat Nhan Dan, Ve Sua Doi Luat Bau Cu QH Va Cong Tac Cua UBTVQH, Phong Quoc Hoi, 1726, Trang 46–57, Trung Tam Luu Tru Quoc Gia III* [from here: TTLTQG3], Hanoi [Report of the 5th session of the 4th term of the National Assembly from 23–28/12/1974. Volume 3: Session of 24/12/1975. Report of the Government Council, Standing Committee of the National Assembly, People's Supreme Court, and People's Supreme Court of Investigation, about the situation on the struggle to implement the Paris peace agreement, the military situation, and work of courts, and people's investigation, and about revising the National Assembly election law, and the mission of the National Assembly's Standing Committee, National Assembly, 1726, pages 46–57, National Archives Centre No. 3, Hanoi].

8. "Cadre Morale and Control of the People of North Vietnam," Central Intelligence Agency [CIA], 30 December 1967, National Security Files [NSF], Central Files [CF], Vietnam, Difficulties in the North, 3K(1), 2/67–12/67, Box 85, Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library [from here: LBJ], Austin, Texas.

9. George Ginsburgs, "Local Government and Administration in North Vietnam, 1945–1954," *The China Quarterly* 10, 1962, 174–204: 192.

Zonal authorities were empowered, with agreement of zonal courts, to grant pardons and reduce sentences, the death sentence excepted.

This study identifies the existence of three types of economic crime in Vietnamese society: the moral crime of profiteering, hoarding, and blackmarketing during famine (or extreme scarcity); ideological crime, which the state deemed “counterrevolutionary” and “sabotage”; and the crime of necessity resorted to by three categories of peasants—poor, middle, or rich. In terms of the latter, a degree of overlap between the three strata can be discerned, as all of them suffered the effects of food shortage and poverty. The middle and rich peasants, however, were impoverished after the state appropriated their land.

Such forms of crime, although driven by different motives, remained constant right from the creation of the DRV in 1945 to the end of the Vietnam War. The causes underlying various modes of corruption were almost identical across the communist world, stemming from the partial or total appropriation of peasants’ (and others’) land and property by the state. Bribery thrived in the late-Stalin period in the Soviet Union with state officials demanding payment for services that were either illegal or were supposed to be provided free. Russian government bureaucrats sometimes coerced common citizens to pay bribes, underscoring the role of bribery as a means of social negotiation.¹⁰ In his magisterial history of state policing during the Stalin period, David Shearer demonstrates that “social order policing,” such as the efforts of both political and civil police, aimed to remove from society those groups that the state deemed a threat to the social order of communism.¹¹

The sociologist Alena Ledeneva takes the story of economic misdeeds in the communist world forward in time in her study examining the relationship between economic crime and informal practices in Russia in the 1980s and 1990s.¹² Ledeneva draws a distinction between *blat* and bribery—the former involving the use of personal networks for obtaining goods and services in short supply, which was not illegal and was based on trust and friendly relations without the immediate expectation of anything in return. Bribery, however, does not derive from personal relations because it is a criminal violation

10. See for example David R. Shearer, *Policing Stalin's Socialism: Repression and Social Order in the Soviet Union, 1924–1953*, New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2009; or David Shearer, “Wheeling and Dealing in Soviet Industry: Syndicates, Trade, and Political Economy at the End of the 1920s,” *Cahiers du Monde Russe* 1–2, 1995, 139–60.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Alena V. Ledeneva, *Russia's Economy of Favours: Blat, Networking and Informal Exchange*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998.

involving a payment. In a similar vein, economic crime persisted in the DRV until the last years of the Vietnam War in the 1970s, defying a three-decade-long campaign to eradicate it.

The authorities were particularly alarmed because some economic crimes—extravagant consumption, theft of rice, and illegal sale of land—were occurring at a time of famine. The office of Prime Minister Pham Van Dong noted with trepidation that there were “a few places” where residents had spent too much money and consumed too much food in marriage celebrations in a report in January 1953.¹³ It observed that people living in provinces situated to the north of the Red River had committed a variety of crimes: In Tien Lu district, four hamlets had reported families selling children, three youths had begun to “work for the enemy,” some starving peasants had sold land, there were 59 reported incidents of “petty theft,” and two incidents of stealing public rice. Like many similar reports from other places, Tien Lu district described what people thought about the famine: “[Some people are] complaining that the Government’s agricultural tax is too heavy, and that is why they are hungry.”¹⁴ As well, the local authorities of Vinh Phuc province described the vast scale of the famine in a 20 September 1953 report, “A Summary of Anti-Famine and Famine Relief Efforts.”¹⁵ They informed the VWP and the Ministry of Agriculture that within the nine districts of Vinh Phuc, comprising 464,352 families, as many as 8,029 families were believed to be “lacking food” but were not yet in danger, while 2,323 families were “threatened by famine.”

It was to be expected that economic crime would mushroom under such dire circumstances. The government responded swiftly by issuing an important decree (No. 151/SL on 12 April 1953), eight months before launch of land reforms in December that year, stipulating jail term of one to five years for land-owners sabotaging production in the reform program and occupying or selling property, while crimes of spying, colluding with the enemy, murder,

13. Alec Gordon Holcombe, “Socialist Transformation in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam,” unpubl. PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2013, 79. Also see *Nghi Quyet, Bien Ban, Bao Cao, Cong Van Cua Ban Kinh Te CP, Ban Van Hoa Xa Hoi, Bo Noi Vu, Bo Canh Nong, Bo Cong Thuong, Uy Ban Khang Chien Hanh Chinh Cac Tinh Ve Tinh Hinh Doi Va Cong Tac Phong Chong Doi 1953* [Resolutions, Minutes, Reports, and Official Correspondence of the Department of Economics, Department of Culture and Society, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Industry, and Provincial Resistance Committees on famine situation and work of fighting famine], TTLTQG3, *Phong Phu Thu Tuong* [PPTT] 2855 [File 2855 from the Office of the Prime Minister].

14. Holcombe, “Socialist Transformation,” 81.

15. *Ibid.*, 83.

organizing groups to overthrow the government, and instigating or causing disorder were punishable with imprisonment from ten years to life, or death.¹⁶

The Party encouraged criticism and self-criticism to cleanse its own cadres and the army ahead of the land reforms to be conducted in 1952–3.¹⁷ It carried out a large scale Party reorganization, as well as a campaign to consolidate the army in 1950–2. Under the supervision of Chinese advisers, the purification campaign aimed to re-educate officers and soldiers. In the course of these campaigns, Party officials, soldiers, and reform cadres were coached through directives, lessons, songs, poems, and stories to raise their class consciousness and inculcate in them hatred for the landowning class.

Reports of economic crime began appearing in situation reports from local Party authorities to higher ups in the capital. The reports were written to highlight the “treachery” of the landowning class and saboteurs that indulged in crime, and to inform the authorities to take corrective police and judicial measures. Some of the reports were sent to the topmost VWP leaders, not just to the lower and middle-level bureaucracy. The reports on famine written by the local-level Peasant Mobilization Subcommittees in 1953 were addressed to the senior leaders by their informal or shortened names: “Uncle” (*Bac* or *Nguyen Tat Thanh*, the titles by which Ho Chi Minh was known), “Mr Than” (VWP Secretary-General Truong Chinh), “Mr To” (Prime Minister Pham Van Dong), “Mr Viet” (VWP Politburo member Hoang Quoc Viet), “Mr Luong” (VWP Central Committee member Le Van Luong), “Mr Lanh” (VWP Politburo member and revolutionary poet To Huu), and “Mr Thang” (VWP Central Committee member Ho Viet Thang).¹⁸

Some reports were narratives of self-criticism, and were not really reports. For example in January 1953, the chairman of a local Economic Committee in Central Vietnam—where famine was severe owing to a 30 per cent shortfall in the food crop—sent a report to the prime minister’s office entitled “Self-Criticism on the Reasons for the Spread of Famine.”¹⁹ Self-criticism followed a

16. “*Sac Lenh So 151/SL*” [*Decree 151/SL*], *PPTT*, File no. 1575, *TTLTQG* 3, Hanoi. Also see, Alex-Thai D. Vo, “Nguyen Thi Nam and the Land Reform in North Vietnam, 1953,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1, 2015, 37–8; and Daniel E. Teodoru, “The Bloodbath Hypothesis: The Maoist Pattern in North Vietnam’s Radical Land Reform,” *Southeast Asian Perspectives* 9, 1973, 48.

17. Alex-Thai D. Vo, “Nguyen Thi Nam,” 9. Also see Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950–1975*, Chapel Hill, NC: U. of North Carolina P., 2000, 40–1.

18. Holcombe, “Socialist Transformation,” 75–6.

19. *Ibid.*, 76–7.

ritualistic pattern: A Party leader would decide that some negative phenomenon, such as famine, was to be attributed to certain shortcomings of a person or a committee lower down in the hierarchy and more directly involved in the issue.

In November 1953, the VWP ordered a selective purge of local Party cells, the most powerful political entity at the community level. Party Central Committee member Le Van Luong was put in charge of the reorganization, which essentially meant purging and hiring cadres. Le explained that a Party cell was considered “basically bad,” if “the majority of the Party members as well as the cell executive are landlords, cruel despots, or are people in the employ of landlords and cruel despots.”²⁰ Such a cell would, therefore, need to be “disbanded,” and whatever good members existed in the cell would be educated so that they would form the “backbone” of a newly formed cell. Le specified that “those Party members who have broken the law, who have been undisciplined, who have created heavy losses for the state and the people, and who are hated by the people, are to be expelled from the Party.”²¹

Following French defeat and departure from the north in 1954, the VWP began cracking down on “anti- [or counter-]revolutionary” activities such as hoarding, operating black markets, sabotaging agrarian reform, and collaborating with “reactionary” elements that undermined the state.²² The campaign was carried out in areas of the north, especially the Red River Delta that had been under French administrative control until very recently. The Party set up a “section for the repression of traitors” within the People’s militia in villages, tasked with investigating and arresting counterrevolutionaries.²³

The early land reforms had an unfortunate timing, as famine engulfed the nation in 1954–5. Thousands of people perished from starvation, mostly in the Catholic regions of upper central Vietnam, which had been under Viet Minh control during the war of resistance. Hunger was one of the reasons why so many more Catholics (around 60,000 people) than non-Catholics wanted to leave the north before the deadline for repatriation in May 1955 established by

20. Le Van Luong, “*Chi thi cua Ban Bi thu, 10/11/1953: Ve chinh don chi bo nong thon trong phat dong quan chung*” [Secretariat Directive, 10/11/1953: Reorganizing the Rural Party Cells during the Mass Mobilization], *Van Kien Dang Toan Tap* [VKD TT] 1953, [The Complete Collection of Party Documents, Hanoi: Chinh Tri Quoc Gia, 2001], 357. Also see, Holcombe, “Socialist Transformation,” 119–20.

21. Holcombe, “Socialist Transformation,” 119–20.

22. Teodoru, “Bloodbath Hypothesis,” 33.

23. *Ibid.*, 36.

the Geneva Agreements of July 1954 that terminated the war. It provided that “persons, on either side of the dividing line at the 17th parallel of latitude, would be free to move to places of their own choice.”²⁴ In the grip of an acute food scarcity, the state took the first step in the land reform with the formation of labor exchange teams: A group of about eight families would help each other work their land, but each plot was still the property of one family, and when the crop was harvested it would belong to that family.

A “regrettable” offshoot of the reforms was the allegation that cadres were embezzling funds for their own purposes. A late-1955 report by the Ministry of Irrigation and Architecture criticized the poor performance of cadres at major projects to reconstruct dams and dikes damaged in the First Indochina War.²⁵

The pursuit of land reform was further complicated because many people who lived outside Hanoi did not fit exactly into the reform’s rigid classificatory scheme—of landlord, peasant, worker—owing to the economic diversity of the regions around the capital city.²⁶ While the areas surrounding Hanoi were mainly agricultural, many communes, such as Thinh Liet (located in Thanh Tri district just southeast of Hanoi on the west bank of the Red River), were involved in other occupations such as fishing, handicrafts, flower cultivation, and production of sticky rice cakes or *banh tet*. The making of such rice cakes was considered an economic crime because the state had reserved the rice for distribution, but it was being diverted by peasants for their personal gain.

24. See “Fiche de situation,” *Periode du 15/12/1954 au 6/01/1955* [Book report on the situation between 15 December 1954 and 6 January 1955], 1 January 1955 dossier, carton 10H618, Service Historique de la Defense [Historical Section of Defence, SHD]: “Note de renseignements: la situation du Vietminh sept mois apres la signature des accords de Geneve” [Intelligence note on the situation of the Vietminh seven months after the Geneva Agreements], 19 February 1955, in SHD; Note de renseignement “Les difficultes interieures de la Republique democratique du Vietnam” [Intelligence note on the DRV’s domestic problems], Le Lieutenant Colonel Vitry, Direction Generale de la Documentation, au Commissariat General de France en Indochine, 19 February 1955, in SHD; “Situation generale du Vietminh a la date du 10 Mars 1955” [Situation of the Vietminh on 10 March 1955], in SHD.

25. Ken Maclean, “Manifest Socialism: The Labor of Representation in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (1956–1959),” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1, 2007, 27–79. Also see *Bo Thuy Loi Va Kien Truc* [BTLKT], Folder *Tap Tai Lieu Ve Hoi Nghi Tong Ket Cong Tac Dap De Nam 1955 Cua Bo Thuy Loi Va Kien Truc* [Collected Documents Summarizing the Ministry of Irrigation and Architecture Conference on the Task of Strengthening Dikes for 1955, 27 November 1955], p.65, File no. 22. Also see *Bao Cao Tong Ket Cong Tac Dap De 1955* [Summary Report on the Task of Strengthening Dikes to Resist Floods in 1955], in BTLKT, Folder: *Tap Tai Lieu Ve Hoi Nghi*, File no. 22.

26. Shaun K. Malarney, *Culture, Ritual and Revolution in Vietnam*, Honolulu, HI: U. of Hawai’i P., 2002, 25.

The heavy-handedness as seen in Tinh Liet commune drove a rift in the state's relationship with society. In this commune, the Party prohibited entire families from engaging in their occupation of producing votive paper ingots because it violated the Party's anti-superstition policy.²⁷ After banning the production of ingots, the cadres converted those families into farmers, causing much resentment because many peasants who were given land had never worked as farmers before. Their crop yields were small and they remained poor as they lacked basic knowledge of farming.

The state squandered whatever goodwill it had earned from peasants through the redistribution of land during the mass mobilization. It antagonized peasants, forcing them to "sell" their rice to the state at below market price as they attempted to build up national rice stocks in the face of a severe grain shortage. VWP secretary-general Truong Chinh's report to the Seventh Plenum of the VWP in March 1955 lamented: "The state has too little food. [Our department of] National Commerce does not have enough rice to control prices and guarantee supply to the cities," warning that, "During the period between harvests, the price of rice will rise higher, the hunger situation will become more serious."²⁸ Prices and the market were being hurt, he declared, because the state did not collect enough revenue to cover expenditure.

As peasants often preferred to use the black market, the VWP regularly conducted campaigns against "hoarding and speculation" (*"tich tru va dau co"*), a catchphrase devised to give a criminal character to peasants who wished to keep their rice rather than sell it to the state below market price. In the same report, Chinh urged Party leaders to label those peasants as criminal whose actions did not adhere to state policy to cooperate in combating the food crisis: "We need to punish the ringleaders, those who hoard rice, who intentionally make the famine worse."²⁹

The food shortage worsened in April 1955 because March and April—ahead of the May harvest—were perennially feared as periods of scarcity because rice stocks from the preceding October harvest were depleted. Central Committee member Le Van Luong alerted the Party in a report: "Many people have lost

27. Malarney, *Culture, Ritual and Revolution in Vietnam*, 37–9.

28. Truong Chinh [Dang Xuan Khu], "*Tinh Hinh Hien Tai Va Nhiem Vu Truoc Mat: Bao Cao Cua Dong Chi Truong Chinh O Hoi Nghi Trung Uong Lan Thu Bay Mo Rong, Tu 3 Den 12–3–1955* [*The Current Situation and Present Tasks: Truong Chinh's Report at the Seventh Expanded Plenum, from 3–12/3/1955*], VKD TT 1955, 119.

29. *Ibid.*, 139.

their strength, suffer from sickness, and there have been people who have starved to death [...] even in places carrying out land reform, there have been people dying from starvation.”³⁰ Luong warned that Party leaders had “underestimated” just how serious the food crisis had become.

Peasants rebelled against the land reform in rural Quynh Luu district of Nghe An province in November 1956, causing Ho Chi Minh to halt the program and remove from office the secretary-general of the VWP, Truong Chinh, who was directing the reforms. After Ho and Giap intervened, the party launched a Rectification of Errors program to restore order and win back support of peasantry that had been wronged.³¹

The relationship between state and society fluctuated as popular support for the Party and the government waxed and waned between the mid-1940s when the first famine occurred, and 1975, when the Second Indochina War ended. The regime’s land reform was demonstrably unpopular as seen in the mass uprising in Nghe An that led Ho Chi Minh to moderate the program. Yet, the state-led effort to end the famine enjoyed mass support. The “Anti-US Resistance War for National Salvation,” too, was popular in the initial decade of the armed struggle (the 1960s), but many people were increasingly exhausted and demoralized fighting a prolonged war.

The Party urged cadres to emulate their exemplary colleagues in a mid-1950s campaign that also exhorted peasants to act like exemplars. It marked a continuing effort to bring about moral transformation of the people by appealing to their sense of ethics and patriotism. One cadre claimed: “You do not have to prod them; when they get hungry enough, they will do it [i.e., become model peasants].”³² Peasants, however, complained that emulation was a ploy to get them to produce more so that the state could collect even more in taxes in the form of rice.

People continually found ways to resist, often mimicking the Party cadres. Mimicry occurred within the re-education campaign that aimed to turn criminals into model cadres, in theory at least. In this process, the citizen reverses

30. Le Van Luong, “*Chi Thi Cua Trung Uong So 12-CT/TW, 9/4/1955: Tang Cuong Lanh Dao Chong Doi Va Giai Quyet Nan Doi*” [Central Committee Directive no. 12, 9/4/1955: Strengthen Leadership of Anti-Famine Efforts and Solve the Problem of Famine], VKDĐT 1955, 241.

31. J. Price Gittinger, “Communist Land Policy in North Viet Nam,” *Far Eastern Survey* 8, 1959, 113–26: 120–1.

32. Ken MacLean, *The Government of Mistrust: Illegibility and Bureaucratic Power in Socialist Vietnam*, Madison, WI: U. of Wisconsin P., 2013, 57–8, 65.

the gaze; they begin to observe the observer, or the model cadre and the trainer, mimicking them in order to appropriate the technologies and discourses of the power wielder.³³ In the Vietnamese social context, mimicry is seen in the Confucian principle of “*chinh giao*,” the belief that political leadership and the power of moral-intellectual indoctrination must be fused together.³⁴ “*Chinh giao*” has a long history, going back to pre-revolutionary Vietnam, when political leaders were already required to set an example for how ordinary folk should live. According to a Vietnamese proverb, “If the superior does not live in conformity with norms and regulations, then the inferior will establish their own stage for unruly behavior.”³⁵ Social superiors were asked to demonstrate that it was possible for common people to emulate them, and they were required to communicate Confucian values by personally enacting them.³⁶

Mimicry sprang from the power wielder’s desire to create a reformed and recognizable other because the original other was not civilized enough.³⁷ The problem for the leadership was that they desired to create obedient subjects who would replicate their moral values and follow their nation-building policy. Although they wanted subjects to mimic them, the reform process resulted in creation of ambivalent subjects whose mimicry was never very far from mockery because it parodied what it mimicked. Many peasants, for instance, turned to crime by following the example set by corrupt Party cadres. In this way, peasants gained some agency, and were not necessarily disempowered completely.³⁸

The Party paid close attention to rectifying its errors and improving relations with society as the land reform entered its next phase. In 1958, the authorities

33. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, London: Routledge, 2000, 187.
34. Alexander Woodside, “The Triumphs and Failures of Mass Education in Vietnam,” *Pacific Affairs* 56, 1983, 401–27. Also see Jonathan D. London, “Education in Vietnam: Historical Roots, Recent Trends,” in *Education in Vietnam*, ed. Jonathan D. London, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2011, 47.
35. Shaun K. Malarney, “Ritual and Revolution in Viet Nam,” unpubl. PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1993, 73.
36. Alexander Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1971, 65.
37. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994, 121.
38. Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 85–92. Also see Bhabha, “Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree outside Delhi, May 1817,” *Critical Inquiry* 1, 1985, 144–65; and Bhabha, “The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination, and the Discourse of Colonialism,” in *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*, eds H.A. Baker, Jr., et al., Chicago, IL: U. of Chicago P., 1996.

ordered peasants to contribute their land to “elementary cooperatives” run by executive committees.³⁹ Farmers still paid tax on land they contributed and they were given a percentage of profit based on the size of their plot. Peasants received a respite when the state permitted rural households to privately produce some crops under a Party resolution in April 1959: The resolution formally created the so-called “five-percent plots” as part of a “supplementary family economy” designed to function alongside collectivized production.”⁴⁰

Government officials complained incessantly about the difficulties they faced in meeting grain procurement targets. Although state trading firms managed to acquire 852,000 tonnes of rice in 1959, only about 17 per cent was of good quality.⁴¹ Grain acquisition was low because rich and middle peasants built their stocks as a safeguard against future famine, leaving little for sale to the government. Officials exaggeratedly claimed that peasants were selling as much as 80 per cent of the rice they received from the state. The officials overestimated the rice stocks of rich peasants, and overlooked the fact that the poorer peasants had almost none.

The transition to collectivization was blighted both by conflict between cadres and by bureaucratic resistance. Deeply entrenched paradoxes marred the drive to “remake” the country’s rural population and “restore” the economy during the second half of the 1950s. The Communist Party repeatedly used these two catchphrases in order to inject some uniformity in competing policies pursued by provincial, regional, and national bodies that attempted to resolve economic problems.⁴² The Party cadres, however, sometimes engaged in bitter resistance to state demands for higher yields as well as new tax structures, which they considered burdensome. Every effort to resolve problems led to further contradictions, because different sections of the bureaucracy separately prescribed their own solutions.⁴³

39. Gittinger, “Communist Land Policy,” 120–1.

40. Nguyen Xuan Lai, “The Family Economy of Farmers,” *Vietnamese Studies* 13, Hanoi: Xunhasaba, 1967, 108–28.

41. Florence Yvon, “The Construction of Socialism in North Vietnam: Reconsidering the Domestic Grain Economy, 1954–1960,” *South East Asia Research* 1, 2008, 43–84: 76.

42. Ken MacLean, “The Arts of Disclosure: Peasant-Bureaucrats, Historiography, and State Socialism in Viet Nam,” PhD diss., University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 2005, 76–186. Also see Balazs Szalontai, “Political and Economic Crisis in North Vietnam, 1955–56,” *Cold War History* 4, 2005, 395–426.

43. MacLean, “Manifest Socialism,” 27–79.

The state placed such severe curbs on the private grain trade in 1960 that it practically amounted to a ban.⁴⁴ From the spring of that year onwards, every farm household had to compulsorily hand over 90 to 95 per cent of their output to the state.⁴⁵ The authorities failed to provide enough rice even to state employees who were entitled to it, as their numbers had risen 37 per cent in 1960 over the previous year (from 350,556 to 482,511). Black markets mushroomed very quickly, as a result. The black market and state-fixed prices were almost the same in early 1960, but the former was 42 per cent higher than the official price in the second half of the year.⁴⁶

Peasants had begun losing autonomy when they were coerced, under unbearable economic pressure, into joining the cooperatives. After their landholdings were reduced to tiny plots, farmers had no option but to join cooperatives, or else they would starve. Within the cooperative system, they faced red tape in getting access to fertilizer and essential items such as salt, seeds, and soap.⁴⁷ Instead of harmony, North Vietnam's economic system was riven with insoluble problems of corruption, greed, and embezzlement, which constitute what Kerkvliet coins as the "wobbly foundations" of land reform.⁴⁸ Centralized administrative control, therefore, was neither uniform nor consistent: The Party and state could be strong and weak in the same areas at the same time.⁴⁹ The weaknesses were evident in the perennial problem of bureaucratic resistance to reform and infighting among cadres.

Yet another manifestation of the weakness of the Party and the government was the involvement of the authorities in widespread corruption, for instance in the rampant fraud in ration cards. Local government departments accumulated the cards of workers who had been transferred, dismissed, or impressed for military service, and there were instances of the wives of cadres bartering ration cards for chickens.⁵⁰ Factory workers carped about the difficulty of obtaining ration cards: They had to take half-a-day's leave to join a queue for

44. Gerard Chaliand, *Les Paysans du Nord Vietnam dans la Guerre*, Paris: Francois Maspero, 1968, 169.

45. Bui Cong Trung, "Ve Van De Luong Thuc," *Nghien Cuu Kinh Te* 2, 1961, 15.

46. *Ibid.*

47. To Duy, "Living Conditions and Welfare of the People in Wartime," *Hoc Tap*, March 1967, 33–34, *Translations from Hoc Tap (THT)*, US Department of Commerce, Joint Publications Research Service, No. 3, 40.

48. Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet, *The Power of Everyday Politics: How Vietnamese Peasants Transformed National Policy*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2005.

49. MacLean, *The Government of Mistrust*, 9–10.

50. *Thoi Moi*, 23 June 1961; *Thoi Moi*, 7 September 1961.

the cards, and when the line was too long, they had to keep returning day after day until they succeeded.

As it became increasingly difficult to make a living, many peasants resisted the efforts of the government Trade Bureau to buy food from them at prices fixed by the state. Trade Bureau officials complained in August 1961 about cooperatives failing to honor contracts they had signed, and “peanut smugglers” who refused to sell their peanuts to the government.⁵¹ Officials admonished the people that pursuit of personal profit was counterrevolutionary:

...We could not sit idly behind our scales, watching the peasants passing our office laden with peanuts which they intended to sell elsewhere, so we posted men at Cong Sen, at a point on National Highway Road No. 5, and at all the crossroads giving access to the Ho market. They had orders to arrest the peanut smugglers.⁵²

Peasants were under such strict surveillance that they could be arrested on a slight suspicion that they might sell their produce elsewhere. Understandably, people began devising new ways of getting around the system. Those who were arrested on one day merely changed their route and time of going to the market on the next. Persons discovered on one day transporting peanuts inside women’s turbans or inside mandolin cases simply changed the hiding place on the next. Officials grumbled:

Each time [we catch them], we become convinced that there is an endemic obstinacy in the peasantry arising from their short-sighted realism. They are anxious to produce only such things as bring profit to themselves, and whenever they are compelled to sell their products to the State they try to retain the maximum benefit for themselves.⁵³

The Ministry of Public Security responded with a plan to improve counter-revolutionary operations by creating scientific and technical departments within the ministry.⁵⁴ The first lot of about 570 “counterrevolutionary elements” was

51. *Nhan Dan*, 26 August 1961.

52. *Ibid.*

53. *Ibid.*

54. “*Nghi Quyét Cua Bo Chinh Tri So 40-NQ/TW, Ngay 20 Thang 1 Nam 1962, Ve Van De Cung Co Va Tang Cuong Luc Luong Cong An*” [“*Politburo Resolution No. 40, 20 January 1962, on Strengthening and Reinforcing the Public Security Forces*”], available at: http://cpv.org.vn/cpv/Modules/News/NewsDetail.aspx?co_id=30063&cn_id=160986, accessed 28 April 2017. Also see “*Nghi Dinh Cua Hoi Dong Chinh Phu So 132-CP Ngay 29 Thang 9 Nam 1961 Quy Dinh Nhiem Vu, Quyén Han Va To Chuc Bo May Cua Bo Cong An*”

detained in 1961, under decrees issued in that year and in 1962, and the campaign acquired greater momentum soon afterwards. About 4,000 people were apprehended in Hanoi, Haiphong, and other cities in 1962, and were dispatched to re-education camps in the remote areas of the north. These persons were accused of having played a variety of subversive roles: Some had worked for the French colonial administration, others had been employed by the pro-French Bao Dai government, and still others were believed to be politically unreliable.⁵⁵ From 1961 to 1965, the Ministry of Public Security sent 11,365 individuals who were “considered dangerous to our security and social order to collective re-education [i.e., prison],” according to an official DRV report.⁵⁶

The government was alarmed that some Party cadres were still breaking the law, confirming that the moral reform campaigns had not produced the desired result. Some ordinary people and cadres began collaborating to bend the rules. A number of managers of cooperatives understated the output of their cooperatives to prevent the government from taking its full share of the crop.⁵⁷ As cadres received a large part of their salary in the form of rice, they underreported the resources in their possession so that they could accumulate enough to redistribute or barter. Peasant laborers were no different as they routinely inflated their labor contributions and understated their harvests in order to sell on the black market. Farmers, too, preferred retaining goods and crops, valuing them much more than currency notes because the state paid very little for crops. Some cooperative managers dodged tight rationing policies by bribing

[“Decree 132 of the Council of Ministers, 29 September 1961, *Regulating the Tasks, Responsibility, and Organization of the Ministry of Public Security*”], available at: <http://thuvienphapluat.vn/archive/Nghi-dinh/Nghi-dinh-132-CP-Quy-dinh-nhiem-vu-quyen-han-va-to-chuc-bo-may-cua-Bo-Cong-an-vb43783t11.aspx>, accessed 28 April 2017.

55. Bao Dai was the emperor of Annam or Central Vietnam from 1926 to 1945, when it was a French protectorate. From 1949–1955, he was the chief of state of the State of Vietnam (South Vietnam). Prime Minister Ngo Dinh Diem ousted him in a fraudulent referendum vote in 1955. Also see, Pham Van Quyen et al., eds, *Bo Cong An, 60 Nam Cong An Nhan Dan Viet Nam (1945–2005)* [“Sixty Years of the People’s Public Security Forces, 1945–2005”], Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Cong An Nhan Dan [NXBCAND], 2006, 201–2; and *Bo Cong An, Tong Cuc Xay Dung Luc Luong, Cuc Cong Tac Chinh Tri [Ministry of Public Security, General Department of Building up the Forces, Political Department]*, 65 *Nam Cong An Nhan Dan Viet Nam, Xay Dung, Chien Dau Va Truong Thanh (So Thao)* [People’s Public Security of Vietnam: Building, Fighting, Growing Up], Hanoi: NXBCAND, 2010, 148.
56. *Bo Noi Vu, Tong Cuc I [Ministry of Interior, General Department I], Major Nguyen Hung Linh and Lieutenant Colonel Hoang Mac, Luc Luong Chong Phan Dong: Lich Su Bien Nien (1954–1975)* [Anti-Reactionary Forces: Chronology of Events, 1954–1975], Hanoi: NXBCAND, 1997, 134.
57. To Duy, “Living Conditions,” 33–4.

state officials to obtain goods.⁵⁸ Another strategy was to exaggerate the needs of cooperative members in order for them to purchase beyond their quota from state shops. Such deliberately falsified reporting of information caused serious errors in data maintained by the bureaucracy.⁵⁹

“Criminal” behavior was exhibited by cadres at both low and high levels. Low-level cadres played a crucial role at the bottom rungs of the Party, where they were closest to the people. Their task was to explain policies to the people, to urge them to carry them out, and report to their superiors. Without the assistance of low-level cadres, the higher cadres proved to be ineffective.⁶⁰ The higher officials were unable to communicate properly and their instructions often failed to produce results because lower officials and peasants did not understand the vaguely worded government documents. As a result, sometimes the peasants were unable to implement policies, and, at other times, they did comprehend but chose to resist, alter, or ignore them.

As ordinary people endured the highhandedness of the cadres, the relationship between state and society continued to be troubled. The Party launched a mass re-education campaign of the cadres in the spring of 1962 in the cities and the countryside.⁶¹ The City People’s Institute of Control and Supervision conducted study sessions in Hanoi to improve cooperation between the cadres and the people within work camps, enterprises, and government organs. The institute dispatched cadres to departments such as police, trade, and industry to deliver lectures on the law and the people’s rights. People could now lodge complaints which were addressed by a new and faster process, and cadres guilty of breaking the law were disciplined.⁶²

Many residents of Hanoi raised an alarm about flagrant mismanagement of national resources by state officials, Party cadres, and workers. Their grievances appeared in the Party newspapers, *Nhan Dan* and *Thu Do Hanoi*. The latter published a letter from a reader on 24 September 1963 entitled “Wasted Construction Materials,” describing being appalled at witnessing untied pieces of bamboo and thatch falling off a truck while a group of workmen sitting in the

58. Ibid.

59. MacLean, *The Government of Mistrust*, 8–9.

60. Ibid., 16–17.

61. Michael P. Mau, “The Training of Cadres in the Lao Dong Party of North Vietnam, 1960–1967,” *Asian Survey* 4, 1969, 281–96. Also see, *Nhan Dan*, 30 August 1962, 2.

62. *Nhan Dan*, 30 August 1962, 2.

back of the truck laughed unconcernedly about it.⁶³ Letters frequently protested improper storage of iron tubes, high tension wires, fertilizer, lumber, asphalt, or cement flagstones left out in the open to rust or rot. Newspapers regularly carried headlines such as “Forgotten Merchandise,” “Waste: Sand, Steel, and Cartwheels,” “Wasted Iron and Steel,” and “We are Responsible for the Rotten Wood.”⁶⁴ Outraged letter writers blamed government departments for not stopping wastage in their domains. At the same time, the authorities grew apprehensive about the problem of moonshine and moonshiners that flourished despite a ban imposed on the production and sale of alcohol because it “wasted” precious rice and wheat.

The Party criticized both the purchase of alcohol by local cadres, many of whom were thought to be “alcoholics,” as well as rampant consumption by the public at large. A *Nhan Dan* article, “Don Hamlet is still making Moonshine,” disclosed that the community of about one hundred households, in Dien Van village (Dien Chau district, Nghe An province), were mostly fishermen, many of whom made moonshine and had not entered into the cooperatives.⁶⁵ The newspaper complained that these people did not produce food for the nation, but they “only make liquor to sell” in the surrounding villages:

Every batch of liquor they make consists of thousands of bottles, a waste of many bushels of rice. There are many households that sometimes make liquor, but they do not have to conceal this from anyone. The moonshine dealers also have many tricks in bringing liquor to their customers that are discreet and fast. . . . In Dien Phong village alone there are nearly ten “dealers” who surreptitiously sell liquor, and every day they look for ways of buying rice from the people to supply to the stills in Don village. One thing worth criticizing is the fact that many local cadres are alcoholics who often go out to buy liquor, thus violating the government policy prohibiting the distillation of moonshine. Sometimes a village cadre will send his children to buy the liquor and the seller will sell the liquor, but with a threat.

63. *Thu Do Hanoi*, 24 September 1963. Also see, “Waste in North Viet-Nam,” *United States Information Agency [USIA] Memorandum*, 21 July 1964, RG 306, Office of Research (OR), Research Memorandums (RM), 1963–82, 1964 M-277 through 1964 M-548, Box 3, *National Archives and Records Administration [NARA]*, College Park, Maryland.

64. *Ibid.*

65. *Nhan Dan*, 23 September 1963. Also see “North Viet-Nam: Moonshine and Cigarettes,” *USIA*, 4 August 1964, RG 306, OR, RM, 1963–82, 1964 M-277 through 1964 M-548, Box 3, NARA.

Bootlegging liquor in Don hamlet wastes rice and is against the laws of the national government. The local authorities have often punished the distillers and sellers of moonshine, but the bootleggers in Don hamlet have not decreased their activity.⁶⁶

Nhan Dan wanted district and village authorities to “take more determined measures” to “indoctrinate the cadres,” and “make plans to bring the bootleggers of Don hamlet into legitimate jobs, to economize and increase production.”⁶⁷ Just four days later, it reported that bootleggers were using innovative ways of transporting alcohol around the countryside, under the headline “Moonshine”:

The “V” hamlet cooperative in the township of Tan Tinh [Lang Giang district, Ha Bac province] has almost forty dwellings, ten of which are fermenting and distilling alcohol to sell it. Every day in Cau Giat community and in the township of Quynh Thanh [Quynh Luu district, Nghe An province] many people sell illegally. It is still customary for people to take five to seven liters of alcohol around the townships to be sold. Up to now, in the village of Phu Tien [Thanh Oai district, in the greater Ha Dong area] there are still many people specializing in the work of distilling alcohol. . . . To protect each person, they usually pour the alcohol into large balloons, into basketballs, footballs, etc., then conceal these in baskets on a shoulder pole. They create a false compartment in the baskets, one for bean sauce and one for alcohol.⁶⁸

The expertise in alcohol distillation was a legacy of the colonial age. Just two decades earlier, under French rule, many Vietnamese had illegally been distilling alcohol, and hiding it from French police in the tall grass growing around their villages. The alcohol monopoly was one of the most pervasive and unpopular institutions in colonial Vietnam from the outset of French colonial rule in 1887 to its end in 1954. The alcohol tax contributed about fifteen per cent to the colonial budget, but actual revenues fell short of expectations, and most of the cash went to its supplier, the *Société française des distilleries de l'Indochine* and, especially initially, to its founder, Auguste-Raphaël Fontaine

66. Ibid.

67. Ibid.

68. *Nhan Dan*, 27 September 1963. Also see “North Viet-Nam: Moonshine and Cigarettes,” NARA.

(1859–1934).⁶⁹ Revenue officers routinely extorted money from villagers when they discovered illegal distilleries, many with numerous industrial-standard stills, and thousands of liters of alcohol aging in caves in rural fields. Villagers set up illegal stills to show their resistance to the high price of legal alcohol and also because they were not fond of the French alcohol. At a session of the *Conseil Colonial* in April 1907, southern Vietnamese councilors complained that the French authorities were forcing the Vietnamese to drink a type of alcohol that was not to their taste, as it lacked the aroma of alcohol made by Asian methods.⁷⁰

The war against corruption dragged on as the conflict against the United States escalated in 1964. Mimicry remained a feature of social relations with *Nhan Dan* decrying a shocking nexus between hoarders and state officials in a scathing commentary in February that year: “They bribe and take advantage of a number of government officials,” while the newspaper regretted that “a number of cadres and employees still want to enjoy the pleasures of life.”⁷¹ It criticized the courts for showing excessive leniency to criminals, advocating strictness in order to eradicate existing errors: “Many tribunals have been too generous—[they have] suspended sentences, parole, exemption from fines; [giving] only a few months imprisonment.”⁷² The rural courts viewed peasants compassionately, even though they secretly withheld grain for sale on the black market because they were so poor and lacking in food.

The Communist Party leaders were in a state of panic over a multi-layered web of corruption spun by the cadres, leading the Party to retaliate with swiftness during the first half of the 1960s. The cadres were able to create a system that facilitated their dishonesty by virtue of their tight control over the collectivized economic resources of cooperatives. Production brigades set aside funds and paddy, and embezzlement spread from cooperative to brigade level.⁷³ A patronage system evolved based on family ancestry and parochial traditions.

69. Erica J. Peters, *Appetites and Aspirations in Vietnam: Food and Drink in the Long Nineteenth Century*, Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2012, 107. Also see Tong doc Duong Lam to Governor General, January 1912, National Archives Center No 1 [TTLTQG 1], Hanoi.

70. *Ibid.*

71. *Nhan Dan*, 20 February 1964.

72. *Ibid.*

73. Chu Van Lam, *Hop Tac Hoa Nong Nghiep Viet Nam: Lich Su - Van De - Trien Vong [Vietnamese Agricultural Cooperativization: History-Problems-Outlook]*, Hanoi: NXBST, 1992, 30.

These misdemeanors were concealed through secret decisions of Party cells, and sham elections of management cadres.

The Party lamented the absence of “revolutionary enthusiasm” among many people, and their lack of personal participation in safeguarding the interests of the state, as it declared in February 1964: “At present, the sense of protecting the socialist economy and finances of the people and cadres is not vigorous,” adding that many persons still “do not denounce strongly or condemn such vices as embezzlement, waste, misappropriation of public funds, speculation, and hoarding, and so forth.”⁷⁴ Criminals were often scolded publicly in the media: “embezzlement still occurs frequently,” the “majority of goods are stolen,” and “hoarders and smugglers later sell the stolen goods at prices three or four times higher than those fixed by the state.”⁷⁵

Ho Chi Minh, however, tempered criticism with praise for the government’s effort to handle economic crises. He declared at a special political conference attended by representatives of the VWP, government, front groups, mass organizations, religious groups, business people, and educational and cultural bodies in Hanoi on 27 March 1964: “We are elated by the great achievements we have recorded,” but he added a caveat: “The sense of responsibility is not yet very high, the products are not yet of very good quality, bureaucratism, waste and corruption are still rife.”⁷⁶

More criticism came from the head of the Directorate of Food, Tran Van Hien, who advised tightening of belts because the country could not feed all the people. Farmers naturally wished to retain most of their crops instead of giving them up to the state. He chided such an attitude: “It is of prime importance to struggle against the view of a number of persons that the food duty policy is a policy for confiscating food, and is more of a mobilization than a purchase.”⁷⁷ He remonstrated: “Anyone who does not approve of the policy of collecting the food purchased on a duty-basis desires to abolish the peasants’ duty toward the state, the worker-peasant alliance, and the mission and function of our people’s democratic government.”⁷⁸ Hien urged peasants to bear

74. *Nhan Dan*, 20 February 1964. Also see Memo, “Ho, Others Admit Difficulties in North Vietnam,” 1 April 1964, *USIA*, RG 306, OR, RM, 1963–82, 1964 M-1 through 1964 M-255, Box 2, *NARA*.

75. *Ibid.*

76. “Hanoi Seeks Vigilance, Unity and Sacrifice,” *USIA*, 9 April 1964, RG 306, OR, RM, 1963–82, 1964 M-1 through 1964 M-255, Box 2, *NARA*.

77. *Hoc Tap*, May 1964. Also see “Hanoi: Doubletalk on the Food Situation,” *USIA*, 13 July 1964, RG 306, OR, RM, 1963–82, 1964 M-277 through 1964 M-548, Box 3, *NARA*.

78. *Ibid.*

the state's interest in mind: "It is incorrect to think that it is advisable to leave a large quantity of food with the peasants to enable them to have enough food, to retain a small quantity, or even to sell the surplus food at a high price in the free market to improve their living standards."⁷⁹ This view, he argued, was "harmful to both the state and peasants at a time when the state is facing difficulties concerning food and when a number of peasants still lack food."⁸⁰

Tran Van Hien depicted moonshiners as counterrevolutionaries, and he chastised housewives for wasting resources by baking cakes and preparing vermicelli. In his role as the head of the state food system, he counseled the Party cadres: "Everyone must strictly carry out the ban on the illegal manufacture of wine from rice and maize, and must gradually restrict the making of cakes and vermicelli with rice and maize for sale on the 'free' market," adding the admonition that, "Nothing is more irrational than the fact that, while the state has to import food, many people use food wastefully."⁸¹

Not only did many people continue producing the forbidden food, they found new ways to resist. A new type of illegal nexus developed between cadres and peasants in the early 1960s, known colloquially as "sneaky contracts" or "*khoan chui*," which several cooperatives in Haiphong adopted in 1962.⁸² The sneakiness involved some cadres permitting households to extend their private plots into cooperative lands in exchange for a percentage of families' harvests from these plots, in order to satisfy the state's demand for grain.⁸³ Such contracts allowed farmers to privately cultivate cooperative land and raise livestock, and sell the surplus on the free market after supplying the required quota to the cooperative. The sneaky contracts were ended by higher level district officials when they were discovered, but in some areas the contracts were so deeply entrenched that eradicating them required intervention by provincial or even national authorities. Meanwhile, a carnival-like picture was conjured in state and Party reports, and in newspapers: Housewives were "wasting" resources by hosting sumptuous parties.

79. *Ibid.*

80. *Ibid.*

81. Tran Van Hien, *Hoc Tap*, May 1964; and see "North Viet-Nam: Moonshine and Cigarettes," NARA.

82. MacLean, *The Government of Mistrust*, 126; and also see Chu Van Lam, *Hop Tac Hoa Nong Nghiep Viet Nam*, 8. Likewise, cooperatives in some districts in the region of Vinh Phu secretly contracted the raising of pigs to individual households in September 1966 (*ibid.*, 24).

83. Chad Raymond, "The Insoluble Internal Conflicts of Agricultural Collectivization in Vietnam," *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 2, 2001, 41–70: 53.

This carnival of economic misdeeds caused Ho Chi Minh to complain in early 1967: “There still is much corruption in cooperatives.”⁸⁴ Government propaganda emphasized the “principle of austerity” under the slogan “economy is patriotism,” in order to urge cooperatives to curb excessive purchases.⁸⁵

To the consternation of state officials, some farmers and peasants began to consume “extravagantly” following the successful crop of 1967. The leading women’s journal, *Phu Nu Viet Nam*, controlled by the Party and the Vietnam Women’s Union, protested: “Some cooperatives’ production teams have organized sumptuous dinner parties, a number of women became extravagant by selling their shares of paddy and corn and spending their money in a wasteful manner.”⁸⁶ The journal reprimanded errant women:

Some others cooked their rice without mixing it with secondary crops. Anniversaries and festivals, funeral and wedding ceremonies, which were all simplified previously, are now sumptuously and extravagantly celebrated by some areas. Rice wine was even made, unlawfully, by some people.⁸⁷

The amount of money and food spent on such celebrations could have fed an entire district for a year, according to government reports for Ha Bac province in 1970.⁸⁸ Many people were ignoring state directives to reduce feasting on occasions of marriages and funerals. Village-level officials believed that economic offences might be reduced if cooperatives’ financial accounts were made available to their members. Officials were, however, realistic in conceding that the problem could not be solved as long as the country had trouble feeding its people.⁸⁹

Not only were people demoralized by the extractive state grain policy, they also suffered relentless US bombardment of shipments of food and medicine

84. Ho Chi Minh, “Address to District Party Committee Cadres,” *Hoc Tap*, March 1967: 1–6; and *THT* 3, 3.

85. *Ibid.*; *THT* 3, 46; and *Phu Nu Viet Nam [Vietnamese Woman]*, 1 January 1968, 7; *Translations on North Vietnam [TNVN]* 326, 74.

86. *Phu Nu Viet Nam*, 1 January 1968, 7; and *TNVN* 326, 74.

87. *Ibid.*

88. Bruce M. Lockhart, “Review of *A World Transformed* by Kim Ninh and *Culture, Ritual and Revolution* by Shaun Kingsley Malamey,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 2, 2003, 384–8: 386.

89. *Nhan Dan*, 27 April 1967, 2; *TNVN* 174, 2, 4; and *TNVN*, 301, 1 December 1967, 10.

sent by friendly communist countries to the north-eastern seaport of Haiphong. Declaring U.S. bombing “accurate and effective,” Special Assistant for National Security Affairs Walt Rostow informed President Johnson in June 1967 that 30 per cent of supplies sent by the Soviet Union and other communist countries by rail, air, and sea were being destroyed during transportation within North Vietnam. As a result, under strict rationing people received only 150 grams of meat per month.⁹⁰

US intelligence officials gleaned evidence about the severe difficulties confronting the North Vietnamese by intercepting letters written by ordinary people and interrogating captured North Vietnamese combatants and fishermen.⁹¹ The intercepted letters contain first-person accounts of ordinary people voicing their discontent: “Meat is very difficult to obtain, and poultry is expensive,” and “our people wear tattered and torn clothes.”⁹² Food rations in Hanoi were maintained at a monthly minimum of thirteen kilograms per person with the help of food imports from communist countries. Although official food prices in Hanoi had not risen, free market prices increased in 1967 over the previous year.

A stringent food policy and US bombardments, together, produced scarcity on such a colossal scale that some people living in Haiphong were turning to crime. There was, for instance, a flourishing market for smuggled goods at Haiphong port. An ethnic Chinese resident of that city, “who in his spare time was engaged in the purchase of contraband goods from foreign seamen,” claimed in July 1967 that three-fourths of the local populace, both Vietnamese and Chinese, was fed up with the war because of scarcity of food, high prices, and low wages.⁹³ “The [Chinese] resident also said that there was some corruption among higher officials in Haiphong,” according to a CIA report.⁹⁴ Another Chinese resident claimed that Vietnamese youth from the countryside, of no more than fifteen years of age, were being conscripted into the army: Teenagers

90. Memo, Rostow to the President, 30 June 1967, National Security File [NSF], Country File [CF], Vietnam, NVN Leadership Attitudes, 3L [1], 3/65–11/67, Box 86, *LBJ*.

91. “The Current State of Morale in North Vietnam,” CIA, 12 May 1967, *NSF, CF*, Vietnam, Difficulties in the North, 3K(1), 2/67–11/67, Box 85, *LBJ*.

92. “The Situation in Hanoi,” CIA, 8 July 1967, *NSF, CF*, Vietnam, Difficulties in the North, 3K(1), 2/67–12/67, Box 85, *LBJ*.

93. “Comments of Chinese Residents of Haiphong Concerning Corruption and Low Morale,” 20 November 1967, CIA, 30 December 1967, *NSF, CF*, Vietnam, Difficulties in the North, 3K(1), 2/67–12/67, Box 85, *LBJ*.

94. *Ibid.*

were impressed, in this case, because most economic crime was being committed by them, and the state aimed to employ them usefully and expeditiously.⁹⁵

A market had come existence for stolen goods that had been damaged in US airstrikes in Haiphong, according to the CIA: "The population's morale was being affected by the realization, for example, that almost all the foreign aid shipments being sent through Haiphong never reached their final destination because of the effectiveness of U.S air strikes."⁹⁶ A resident of Haiphong's Chinese quarter complained that "there was some corruption going on among the higher officials in Haiphong, as well as signs of minor pilferage involving lower cadres at the port."⁹⁷ He alleged that "a racket had sprung up involving partially damaged aid shipments; such goods were surveyed as unusable and then secretly sold for a personal profit."⁹⁸ Civilian morale, too, was on the "decline because of the scarcity of foodstuffs, high prices, and low wages."⁹⁹

The people were dispirited because their diet lacked nutrients. A British intelligence officer who traveled across the north reported in November 1967 that food shortages were "undoubtedly bad" and that the diet was "poor and probably deficient in vitamin if not in calories" by the standards of the West and of the richer countries of Southeast Asia.¹⁰⁰ "The people do not look starving, and their drab diet and small rations appear to keep them relatively healthy," he observed. Extensive communal cooking enabled members of any organization to eat adequately for between 18 to 24 dong a month, a reasonable price for the lowest paid worker who earned 50 to 60 dong a month, with a little leftover for luxuries such as cigarettes, open market vegetables, or beer.

The assumption that crime was increasing because food consumption was decreasing is supported by dietary data. The table above indicates a link between rising economic crime and people who had less food to eat in 1967 than in the period 1959–1963 (of course, these are averages, and one suspects a wide variety between diets). In 1967, calorie intake fell more than 1.5% over 1963, and declined more than 4% over 1959. In 1967, consumption of protein

95. *Ibid.*

96. *Ibid.*

97. *Ibid.*

98. *Ibid.*

99. *Ibid.*

100. "British Reports from Hanoi: Effect of Bombing," Cable, Ellsworth Bunker to Department of State, 8 December 1967, *NSF, CF, Vietnam, Difficulties in the North*, 3K(1), 2/67–12/67, Box 85, *LBJ*.

Table 1. North Vietnam: Estimated Consumption of Per Capita Daily Calories¹⁰¹

	1959	1963	1967
Rice	1,511	1,391	1,146
Wheat Flour	NA	NA	96
Corn, tubers, roots	190	246	418
Vegetable oils, lard	66	66	52
Fish, meat, poultry, eggs	137	136	93
Sugar, molasses	23	33	43
Fruits, vegetables	38	38	32
TOTAL	1,965	1,910	1,880
Domestic Food Supply	1,965	1,910	1,650
Imported Food Supply	NA	NA	230
Grams Per Capita	NA	NA	NA
Protein	48.2	45.4	42.7
Fat	23.4	22.8	18.9

dropped almost 6% over 1963, and plunged more than 11% over 1959. And in 1967, intake of fat fell more than 17% over 1963, and plummeted more than 19% over 1959. The food distribution system suffered massive disruption early in 1965 with the initiation of US bombing of lines of communication and the inability of the state distribution organization to cope with additional tasks imposed on it by evacuation of a significant part of urban workers to rural areas, where they were needed to repair damaged facilities.¹⁰²

The reform campaigns to “remake” the people and get them to consume less made little sense because food scarcity was the single most important factor contributing to discontent. According to “US observers” who had traveled to rural North Vietnam in December 1967, the people were discontented because of numerous factors: “The danger of bombs, the scarcity of food, tax increases, [government’s] failure to fulfill promises, the low standard of living, the excesses and deaths of the agrarian reform in North Vietnam, the severe controls on the people, and the network of spies, continuous political indoctrination and propaganda, and prohibition of religious practices.”¹⁰³ The same

101. Source: Table, “Declining Productivity in North Vietnam’s War Economy,” 1 November 1967, Intelligence Note, U.S. Department of State, *NSF, CF, Vietnam, Difficulties in the North, 3K(1), 3/67–6/67, LBJ*.

102. “Food Distribution Problem,” CIA, 26 July 1967, *NSF, CF—Vietnam, 3/67–6/67, Southeast Asia, Special Intelligence Material, Vol. XI, Box 51, LBJ*.

103. “Reasons for Discontent among ordinary North Vietnamese citizens,” CIA, 30 December 1967, *NSF, CF, Vietnam, Difficulties in the North, 3K(1), 2/67–12/67, Box 85, LBJ*.

report declared that the “scarcity of food is the most significant factor contributing to discontent,” clarifying that “the food supply was inadequate even before the war but now it is worse; the standard of living under the French was far higher than that at present.”¹⁰⁴ The report argued that a “source of irritation” for the people was “the deception by the communists in trying to explain everything away, including the war, the confiscation of property, the forced labor, the drafting of children for forced labor, and the lack of food.”¹⁰⁵ Gloomy US intelligence field reports contradicted glowing DRV government announcements and press commentaries constructing an ideological citadel of strong national will and a cohesive population that was mobilizing voluntarily as it made supreme sacrifices.

The lives of people in the capital city of Hanoi were a picture of economic desperation. They would not, however, speak out openly against the hardships for fear of reprisal from the Party. Not only were numerous cadres and ordinary people enmeshed in crime, but many juveniles, including the children of cadres, were participating in a variety of misdeeds. According to the same U.S. intelligence report: “A teenage girl stole earrings off the ears of one of their children. Stealing is common in Hanoi, they [the local people] said, as the people there are hungry and steal so they can eat.”¹⁰⁶ While a year earlier, in 1967, stealing had not been a problem in Hanoi, one of the girls interviewed “said she had heard that there was a great deal of corruption among the cadres but the only actual case she knew of within the last three years involved a cadre who was increasing the amounts on coal mine vouchers and keeping the excess himself.”¹⁰⁷ He was caught, sent to jail for five or six months, and was back at the mine working as an ordinary laborer. The report reached a logical conclusion: “The people generally dislike the cadre because they receive many benefits and obtain things that ordinary citizens cannot. However, the people never criticize the cadre, even behind their backs, for fear of punishment.”¹⁰⁸

North-Vietnamese society was stratified as the Communist Party cadres received benefits denied to ordinary people. Crime was fueled by stark social and economic inequality. According to the same US intelligence report:

104. *Ibid.*

105. *Ibid.*

106. “Reasons for Discontent among ordinary North Vietnamese citizens,” LBJ.

107. *Ibid.*

108. *Ibid.*

It is fairly easy to identify a Lao Dong Party member by general appearance and state of health [and] even a street sweeper who is a Party member is better off than someone with a better job but who is not a Party member. . . . Party members above rank-and-file have shoes, good quality khaki trousers, a good shirt (sometimes even wool), and usually carry a leather portfolio[, while] [t]echnicians are also treated well, and usually have a pair of blue trousers and a shirt better than the ordinary people, but not as good as those of a Party member. . . . Preferential treatment [on admission to hospitals or for checkups] is given to hospital patients who are Party members or cadre, but the common people who know of this never protest.¹⁰⁹

The authorities responded in unprecedentedly harsh fashion as crime burgeoned. They suppressed “anti-revolutionaries,” and “230,000 out of 300,000 people who had opposed the Hanoi government were sent to reformatories,” according to a notebook belonging to a high level VWP cadre written between October 1967 and January 1968, and captured by a unit of the US 1st Cavalry Division.¹¹⁰ The event known as the Revisionist Anti-Party Affair was a purge of unparalleled scale mainly of pro-Soviet moderates within the Party, military, and intelligentsia that began in July 1967. They were arrested because they not only opposed the Party’s policy of launching a large-scale military assault that later took the shape of the Tet Offensive in early 1968, but they also favored negotiations.¹¹¹ While most of those sent to reformatories were political opponents of the state, they included many who dissented from economic policies as well. According to the notes relating to an indoctrination session contained within the notebook: “Corruption is the gravest social problem in North Vietnam; [t]he majority of the cadre are grafters.”¹¹²

Many of the children of cadres, too, were allegedly involved in juvenile crime. DRV officials were reportedly worried about it. The notebook declared:

109. Ibid.

110. “Captured Document Reveals Difficulties in North Vietnam,” Telegram, U.S. Embassy, Saigon to Secretary of State, [date missing] July 1968, NSF, CF, Vietnam, Difficulties in the North, 3K[2], 1/68–1/69, Box 85, LBJ.

111. Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi’s War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam*, Chapel Hill, NC: U. of North Carolina P., 2012, 96; K.W. Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013, 603.

112. “Captured Document,” LBJ.

“There are 1,500 teenage pickpockets in Hanoi, most of them the children of cadre, even high level cadre,” adding, “These teenagers are alleged to commit 30% to 40% as many crimes as the professional criminals,” and that “as many as 50 of the latter are said to be arrested in a single night in Hanoi.”¹¹³ The notebook revealed that “there are also a number of prostitutes who come from rural areas into Hanoi; a]pproximately ten of these ladies frequented European embassies, including those of the Socialist countries.”¹¹⁴

With the economy in turmoil, the DRV government issued a lengthy decree in the name of Ho Chi Minh on 21 March 1968, warning that counterrevolutionary crimes would be punished with the death penalty.¹¹⁵ The state employed such methods at a time when agricultural yields fell far short of the amount needed to feed the population. North Vietnam had historically been a food-deficit area, with 150,000 to 300,000 tonnes of rice being shipped from the south every year, until the end of French colonial rule.¹¹⁶ The per capita production of rice had been declining since 1959, and combined per capita production of rice and subsidiary foods (wheat flour and manioc) had also fallen, albeit at a slower rate. The DRV produced 4 million tons of rice in 1968, 3.7 million tons in 1969 (due to flooding of the 10th month crop), 4.5 million tons in 1970 (considered a good year), 4 million tons in 1971 (due to floods in August-September), and 4.8 million tons in 1972.¹¹⁷ Since the country required a minimum of 5.9 million tons of rice a year to feed its 22 million people, the government filled the gap by requesting food aid from friendly communist nations.

The economy began improving slightly, and spasmodically, after President Johnson halted bombing (the first bombing pause was ordered for six days in May 1965 to encourage Hanoi to negotiate peace, and the second pause in December 1965 lasted 37 days). Although rationing continued, minor luxuries such as meat, soap, and matches were easier to obtain. Yet, “the black market persists, as do inflationary pressures and consumer goods shortages,” declared

113. Ibid.

114. Ibid.

115. Jon M. Van Dyke, *North Vietnam's Strategy for Survival*, Palo Alto, CA: Pacific Books, 1972, 82.

116. “The Effects of Harvests on Food Availabilities,” CIA, 26 July 1967, *NSF, CF*, Vietnam, 3/67-6/67, Southeast Asia, Special Intelligence Material, Vol. XI. Box 51, *LBJ*.

117. Douglas Pike, “North Vietnam in the Year 1972,” *Asian Survey* 1, 1973, 46-59.

a US State Department intelligence report in September 1967.¹¹⁸ Typhoons had recently damaged the new rice crop, and “rice rations” were issued half in rice and half in “unpopular substitutes” such as wheat flour and manioc.¹¹⁹ The VWP separately argued that food shortage was caused mainly by an upsurge in crime. Truong Chinh complained about “problems in the cooperatives, and in corruption, management errors, black marketeering, and the resurgence of small producers,” in a speech to a conference of Party cadres in the summer of 1968.¹²⁰

An unusual international dimension to economic crime—about a black market comprising foreigners and Vietnamese in Hanoi—was disclosed in a US intelligence report in November 1968. “Indians, Poles and some foreign Asian residents were actively selling transistor radios and watches to Vietnamese black-marketeters,” the report revealed and added: “The transactions usually take place in one of the parks in Hanoi.”¹²¹ The foreigners were readily accepting North-Vietnamese dong, which they were reselling in early November to other members of the foreign community at the rate of 16 North Vietnamese dong for US\$1.00. The usual rate of exchange at the time was 3.5 dong for US\$1.00.¹²²

The DRV had been combating “social evils,” or “*te nan xa hoi*,” since the first thought reform program in the 1950s. More than twenty years later, the Ministry of Public Security’s work plan for the period from 1971 to 1975 continued emphasizing the prevention and reduction of crime, and the correct application of the law against perpetrators.¹²³ It recommended improvement in police investigative work and in crime reporting systems. Identifying the “central problem of theft and prevention of crime,” the plan instructed police

118. “Conditions in North Vietnam,” State Department Intelligence Note, 18 September 1968, *NSF, CF, Vietnam, Difficulties in the North*, 3K[2], 1/68–1/69, Box 85, *LBJ*.

119. *Ibid.*

120. “Speech given by Truong Chinh, DRV’s Number 3 man,” Memo, Wright to Rostow, 16 October 1968, *NSF, CF, Vietnam, NVN Leadership Attitudes*, 3L[2], 12/67–11/68, Box 86, *LBJ*.

121. CIA Intelligence Information Cable, 22 November 1968, *NSF, CF, Vietnam, Difficulties in the North*, 3K [2], 1/68–1/69, Box 85, *LBJ*.

122. *Ibid.*

123. Quoted in Martin Grossheim, “The East German Stasi and the Modernization of the Vietnamese Security Apparatus, 1965–1989,” Document, Excerpts from the Perspective Plan of the Ministry of State Security for the years 1971–1975 (field of policing), *Cold War International History Project*, e-Dossier No. 51, Wilson Center, available at: http://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/stasi-aid-and-the-modernization-the-vietnamese-secret-police#_ftnref9, accessed 29 April 2017.

and concerned departments to: (1) create a single registration system to record all criminal acts; (2) interrogate offenders skillfully, and improve records' management; (3) prepare lists of negative elements, and enlist more informers; (4) register all persons discharged from prison; and (5) impose punitive and just punishment on professional criminals.

The campaign of 1971 aimed to turn prostitutes, drug users, and juvenile delinquents into model members of society, in the following ways:

- (1) reducing youth crime, hooliganism, battery, and prostitution by forging close cooperation between schools or social organizations and local state organs;
- (2) fighting social "decadence" infiltrating into the north from South Vietnam by grouping southerners in camps, educating them, and isolating them from other people (in re-education camps);
- (3) registering beggars, prostitutes, and pimps, and educating them within the penal system and educational institutions;
- (4) registering the entire DRV population in lists through the security commissions and the village police;
- (5) creating files on all men over sixteen years of age;
- (6) issuing identity cards to the entire population of cities, and 50 per cent of the population of villages (to be carried out by village police by 1975);
- (7) registering all weapons and persons who carried weapons;
- (8) registering all printers, typewriter owners, stamp manufacturers, pharmacists, as well as their tools, while these occupation groups were placed under surveillance of a newly established network of unofficial informants recruited by the Ministry of Public Security.¹²⁴

At this time, DRV officials had to cope with the US bombardments of food and essential supplies arriving by sea at Haiphong port, in attacks aimed at denying food and medicine because as much as 90 per cent of imports came by sea from communist and neutral countries in Asia, the Soviet Union, Europe and Latin America, and 10% overland from China. US officials estimated that 33,000 US airstrikes had destroyed at least 3,000 DRV transport trucks, wiping out 50 per cent to 80 per cent of deliveries at the port between April and August 1972.¹²⁵

Taking advantage of the turmoil of war, some cooperatives located within the war zones began retaining a larger share of their crop than was permitted

124. *Ibid.*

125. Pike, "North Vietnam in the Year 1972."

for sale outside the state's compulsory purchases.¹²⁶ In response, senior Party cadres and district officials re-imposed their authority over cooperatives under their supervision within the war zones. They aimed to increase rice production by a variety of measures such as tighter control, using "miracle" strains of rice, and bringing more land under cultivation. These plans were only partially successful because of the intensive US bombing during Christmas in December 1972, as well as a mild winter that was unsuitable for planting, and a debilitating combination of drought followed by heavy rains. Rice production in the spring of 1973, consequently, was more than 5 per cent below target, and more than 4 per cent lower than the 1972 harvest, although it was still enough to make it "one of the three best crops over the last fifteen years."¹²⁷

The battle against economic crime ran into its fourth decade as DRV officials perennially struggled to contain it. Newly accessible Vietnamese documents show that the authorities combated crime with recharged vigor in 1974. The People's Supreme Court in Hanoi conducted a series of investigations against criminals, leading to sentencing and re-education in that year. The court declared: "The way to punish the ringleaders is by re-educating them, by training them," in a comprehensive report entitled "The Anti-Revolutionary Elements and those who Destroy the Process of Building Peace and Socialism" released in December 1974.¹²⁸

The report described the various types of economic crime that "broke the nation's law and communist society."¹²⁹ The Supreme Court was concerned about crimes "related to bringing food, iron, and cement in order to sell them in the black market," and about numerous "break-ins."¹³⁰ It revealed that most robberies in northern cities and towns were still being carried out by young people. The campaigns to channel the energies of young people into nation building had not been a complete success. The court commented: "In Hanoi, robberies comprise 80 per cent of all crimes, and many criminals are

126. William S. Turley, "The Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the 'Third State' of the Revolution," *Asian Survey* 1, 1974, 78–88: 83.

127. *Vietnam Courier*, 15 August 1973, 18.

128. *Ho So Ky Hop Thu Nam Cua QH Khoa IV Tu Ngay 23–28/12/1974*. Tap 3: *Phien Hop Ngay 24/12/1975*. *Bao Cao Cua HDCP, UBTVQH, TANDTC, VKSNDTC Ve Tinh Hinh Dau Tranh Thi Hanh Hiep Dinh Pari, Tinh Hinh Quan Su, Cong Tac Toa, An Va Kiem Rat Nhan Dan, Ve Sua Doi Luat Bau Cu QH Va Cong Tac Cua UBTVQH, Phong Quoc Hoi*, 1726, Trang 46–57, TTLTQG 3, Hanoi.

129. *Ibid.*

130. *Ibid.*

young people. In Hanoi, 66 per cent of the criminals are less than 30 years old, and teenaged criminals comprise 8.5 per cent of this segment.”¹³¹

The disproportionately large share of young people in the overall profile of crime in Hanoi troubled state officials because the younger generation was supposed to bear responsibility of fighting the long war of resistance by willingly sacrificing personal comfort. Striking a note of alarm, the Supreme Court revealed that the number of cases of economic crime had risen 38 per cent in 1974 over the previous year. “Many of these cases were complicated, for example in Vinh Phuc province the judge took seventeen days to decide a corruption case,” it remarked.¹³² Seventeen days was thought to be an excessively long time to decide cases of petty crime.

Most alarmingly, there was an increase in the number of state officials and workers committing crimes in 1974 over the previous year, according to People’s Supreme Court and National Assembly documents. The 1971 campaign to reform state and party cadres had fallen short.

Police officers and thieves collaborated to operate the Hanoi black market, the report noted with growing apprehension. “Many crimes take place because officers are negligent. Officers and thieves help each other to steal national materials to sell in the Hanoi black market.”¹³³ Citing “deliberate lack of policing” as a reason for rising crime, it attributed murders to a lack of proper storage of guns and bombs in insecure armories that easily fell into the hands of criminals.¹³⁴

The battle against crime was flawed by a contradiction. On the one hand, the authorities were taking tougher action than in the past against state and Party cadres, as the number of jail sentences—ranging from 10 to 20 year—increased by 79 per cent in 1974 over the previous year. On the other hand, there was a sharp rise in cases involving officials: “Many officials are serving fifteen to twenty year jail terms[, while i]n 1974 such cases have doubled over the previous year, showing that officials lack responsibility, and they waste government money.”¹³⁵ Judges in Haiphong and Ha Tinh had recently sentenced four hardened criminals to death, according to the same report.

131. *Ibid.*

132. *Ibid.*

133. *Ibid.*

134. *Ibid.*

135. *Ibid.*

“The criminals are dangerous people and judges pass death sentences as a last resort,” the report clarified.¹³⁶ Under such circumstances, the Supreme Court implemented a program, “Voice of Vietnam,” to educate people about the law.

The Hanoi authorities were contemplating an expansion of the legal system and addressing its shortcomings: “We are drawing up plans to set up the University of Law, and to organize short and long term courses for our staff, and improve the mechanism and capacity of the tribunals.”¹³⁷ Since 47 per cent of cases were settled by reconciliation, the state needed to increase the number of reconciliation tribunals to resolve cases, the report suggested. Judges should be better trained, and economic laws strengthened in view of rising crime, the report recommended.¹³⁸ Criticizing the judicial system, it revealed that the appeals’ courts and the small courts had to re-judge cases at times because the evidence against the accused was not strong enough, or the sentences did not fit the crime. Identifying the root of the problem, the report commented:

Some staff have limited capacity, and the interest of witnesses is not protected sufficiently. The legal system does not meet the requirements of the situation. The Party and the state should revise the laws, especially the economic laws.¹³⁹

The courts were enhancing their capacity to handle cases. The crimes that the state was able to investigate increased by 19 per cent in 1974 over the previous year. In 1974 the People’s Supreme Court prosecuted 75 per cent of the crimes that the court had investigated.¹⁴⁰ The courts acted against the departments where the crimes were occurring. As well, the Supreme Court worked closely with the security forces, the smaller courts, and the people’s organizations to curb petty crime on the streets. As a result of such cooperation the

136. Ibid.

137. Ibid.

138. Ibid.

139. Ibid.

140. *Ho So Ky Hop Thu Nam Cua QH Khoa IV Tu Ngay 23–28/12/1974*. Tap 3: *Phien Hop Ngay 24/12/1975, Bao Cao Cua HDCP, UBTVQH, TANDTC, VKSNDTC Ve Tinh Hinh Dau Tranh Thi Hanh Hiep Dinh Pari, Tinh Hinh Quan Su, Cong Tac Toa, An Va Kiem Rat Nhan Dan, Ve Sua Doi Luat Bau Cu QH Va Cong Tac Cua UBTVQH*, So 11/VKS, 21/12/1974, Phong Quoc Hoi, 1726, Trang 58–68, TLLTQG 3, Hanoi.

court “received about 40,000 letters of complaint from the public about all sorts of crimes in 1974.”¹⁴¹

The People Supreme Court suggested an array of “solutions to strengthen socialist law”¹⁴²:

First, it directed all departments, central and local, to adhere to the regulations on the duties and responsibilities of their departments, especially relating to protecting state property.

Secondly, they were ordered to conduct an educational program for officials on the socialist law of the state.

Thirdly, it empowered the population to openly investigate and combat red-tape and abuse of authority.

And, finally it directed the state to improve the capability and performance of inspection committees overseeing departmental functioning.¹⁴³

Almost 30 years after the creation of the DRV, the preponderance of economic crime continued to produce great anxiety among the authorities because it depleted food stocks, and undermined both nation building and the war effort. Distressingly, many “criminals” were young people and cadres who were supposed to have behaved in an exemplary manner. Official programs to prevent crime through propaganda and education did not significantly lower the crime rate.

Economic crime lingered through three decades because of an overwhelming sense of alienation among citizens. It was a challenge that communist societies could not properly address.¹⁴⁴ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels had declared in their *Collected Works* that alienation might persist for some time during the transition to communism because the harsh conduct of revolution would antagonize workers who would become less disaffected only gradually. There is good reason to believe that alienation tended to cause crime, and that crime would at least continue until a communist society had been attained.¹⁴⁵

141. Ibid.

142. Ibid.

143. Ibid.

144. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 37, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1975, 807.

145. Mark Cowling, “Would Communism Eliminate Crime?” *Studies in Marxism* 12, 2011, 149–168.

Criminals stubbornly resisted re-education and reform because they lived under state domination and surveillance for an extended period.¹⁴⁶ As surveillance grew more intense, resistance against surveillance became stronger. Released from detention or re-education, the peasant often remained an emblem of freedom in practicing indiscipline.

Corruption proved difficult to eradicate from agricultural cooperatives, first, because many local officials did not run them in a transparent manner, as they were supposed to. Peasants belonging to cooperatives believed that their leaders were dishonest.¹⁴⁷ At times they took the grain to demonstrate their opposition to the rude and offensive officials. Secondly, peasants resisted state appropriation of their grain by clandestinely taking paddy from collective fields.¹⁴⁸

The authorities urged Party cadres to follow the Confucian principle of “*chinh giao*” that blended political leadership and the power of moral and intellectual indoctrination. They were expected to conduct themselves in an exemplary manner for the citizens. They were supposed to create a reformed peasant who would emulate their moral values. But many turned to crime by mimicking the example set by corrupt Party cadres and officials. A principal cause of the failure was the weakness of the state, as well as the unwillingness of cadres to adhere to the reform process.

As the courts were well-known for showing leniency towards some “criminals,” they were not seen as criminals: They were errant, they were aberrant, and they were delinquent. People, however, actively resisted state policy by withholding grain or selling it on the black market, and in that sense they seceded from the state project. Common people were resorting to crime: For instance, in 1967, many people in Hanoi said they were poor and hungry.¹⁴⁹ They indignantly commented that they stole so that they could eat.

There were a few certainties about the nature of crime: The origins of corruption were not located in inherent criminality among people; and some people took to crime to make a living because economic nationalization had not only appropriated their sole possession, their land, but also denied them economic autonomy. The final certainty was that their status as economic

146. Matthew Friberg, “Foucault, Freedom and the Limits of Freedom,” *Arche* 1, 2010, 3–14. Also see Thomas Dumm, *Michel Foucault and the Politics of Freedom*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996, 111, 114.

147. Kerkvliet, *The Power of Everyday Politics*, 2, 17.

148. *Ibid.*, 24.

149. “Cadre Morale and Control of the People,” *LBJ*.

criminals was temporary because the authorities attempted to re-educate them, and again impress them into the military or in nation building. The identity of offenders was not fixed because when judges showed leniency and sympathy towards them, they were recognizing that the poverty-stricken people actually endured tremendous hardship in their daily lives, and that it was all right to treat them compassionately. Offenders, however, remained patriotic, and many fought for their country. The DRV failed to control economic crime because of the weakness of the state and the Party, and not for a lack of trying.

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