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A ‘Total War’ of Decolonization? Social Mobilization and State-Building in Communist Vietnam (1949–54)

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By choosing to transition to modern, set-piece battle during the second half of the Indochina War, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) created one of the most socially totalizing wars in order to meet that ambitious goal. This article argues that, while the DRV did indeed create a remarkably modern army of six divisions, the lack of a mechanized logistical system meant that it had to mobilize hundreds of thousands of civilian porters to supply its troops moving across Indochina. To do this, the communist party undertook a massive mobilization drive and simultaneously expanded its efforts to take the state in hand. The DRV made war, but war also directly shaped the nature of this state. This article also shows why this transition to modern war rapidly collapsed the line between civilians and combatants in ways more ‘totalizing’ than many have previously thought.

KEYWORDS totalizing, civilians, modern war, state-making, logistics, decolonization, Indochina War

If scholars have spilled much ink over the question and the nature of ‘total war’ in the West ranging from the French revolutionary wars of the late eighteenth century to the twentieth century’s devastating world wars, few have considered the extent to which colonial wars occurring in the global south also gave rise to remarkably totalizing conflicts.¹ Hew Strachan made just such a point in an incisive essay entitled ‘On

¹ For major reflections on ‘total war’, see the edited volumes: *A World at Total War: Global Conflict and the Politics of Destruction, 1937–1945*, ed. by Roger Chickering, Stig Förster, and Bernd Greiner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); *On the Road to Total War: The American Civil War and the German Wars of Unification, 1861–1871*, ed. by Stig Förster and Jörg Nagler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); *Anticipating Total War: The German and American Experiences, 1871–1914*, ed. by Manfred F. Boemeke, Roger Chickering, and Stig Förster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); *The Shadows of Total War: Europe, East Asia, and the United States, 1919–1939*, ed. by Roger Chickering and Stig Förster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); *La Guerre Totale*, ed. by Francois Géré and Thierry Widemann (Paris: Economica, 2001); *The People in Arms: Military Myth and National Mobilization since the French Revolution*, ed. by Daniel Moran and Arthur Waldron (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); and Jean-Yves Guimar, *L’Invention de la Guerre Totale, XVIIIe–XXe Siècle* (Paris: Le Félin, 2004).

Total War and Modern War'.² Talbot Imlay seconded him more recently in an insightful critical discussion of the concept of 'total war'.³ Both scholars suggest that, because insurgencies lacked modern weapons industries, armaments, and regular armies equal to those of their industrialized Western opponents, guerrilla leaders had little choice but to intensify their reliance on the surrounding geography, resources, and people. Developed Western states fighting such asymmetrical conflicts never had to put their home fronts on the same war footing. Liberation movements such as the Front de Liberation National (FLN) in Algeria or the Viet Minh in Vietnam did and, in so doing, they rapidly collapsed the distinction between civilians and combatants, one of the core definitions of total war.

While scholars know that no war is ever 'total',⁴ I would like to use Strachan and Imlay's insights into the unequal nature of colonial wars in the non-Western context to argue that the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) initiated from 1950 what became one of the most 'totalizing' wars in the history of twentieth-century decolonization, profoundly transforming its state and the society it sought to mobilize. Three interconnected transformations led to this. First, in 1949, Vietnamese communist leaders deliberately chose to move from low-intensity guerrilla skirmishes to conventional warfare in order to defeat the colonizer on the battlefield. This meant achieving a divisional army, run by a modern general staff, and supported by sophisticated intelligence, communications, medical, and transport services. It also meant obtaining modern military force. From 1950, thanks to Sino-Soviet assistance and the help of hundreds of Chinese advisors, the DRV began training, equipping, and running an army of seven divisions, capable of deploying modern firepower. While guerrilla ambushes remained part of the DRV's operations, from 1950 this was no longer low-intensity warfare. Vietnamese communists, like their counterparts in China and North Korea, transitioned to conventional war in order to take the battle to their adversaries. This was particularly the case in the north.

Second, although its victory over the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 demonstrated that the Viet Minh could fight a modern set-piece battle and win, the *deployable levels of modern lethal violence* remained uneven. True, the communist bloc provided the DRV with modern weapons such as artillery, anti-aircraft batteries, grenades, and machine guns. However, the Viet Minh never fielded tanks, planes, or a navy, or deployed a fully mechanized transport and logistical system. Its medical service remained primitive. Nor did the DRV regular army enjoy the advantage of

² Hew Strachan, 'Essay and Reflection: On Total War and Modern War', *The International History Review*, 22.2 (June 2000), 341–370, especially 353–55.

³ Talbot Imlay, 'Total War', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 30.3 (2007), 547–70.

⁴ On the dangers of applying the concept of 'total war' indiscriminately to any and every war, see: *The Shadow of Total War*, pp. 6–7; Mark E. Neely, 'Was the Civil War a Total War?', *Civil War History*, 50.4 (December 2004), 343–458; Strachan, 'Essay and Reflection'; and Imlay, 'Total War'. In his study of the 'southern revolution' during the Vietnam War, David Hunt speaks of 'total war' (he even uses it in his title), but nowhere in his introduction or in his book does he define what he means in theoretical and methodological terms. David Hunt, *Vietnam's Southern Revolution: From Peasant Insurrection to Total War, 1959–1968* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009). David Bell follows suit in the latest attempt to establish the 'first' total war: *The First Total War: Napoleon's Europe and the Birth of Warfare As We Know It* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2007). For insightful critiques of this book see: <<http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/essays/PDF/BellForum.pdf>> [accessed 4 June 2012].

numbers. Vietnam was not China. French Union and Associated State of Vietnam (ASV) regular forces were numerically superior. In terms of size and modern firepower, the DRV thus remained at a disadvantage when delivering a fully conventional war *on equal terms*.

This second point on the uneven level of deployable violence contains two important corollaries with major socio-political implications. In order to make the transition to modern war, the DRV had to mobilize on an unprecedented social scale and in record time. To do so, the government incorporated mandatory military service in late 1949, declared a state of general mobilization in early 1950, and initiated full-scale land reform to induce its majority peasant population to fight in 1953–54. In addition, in order to ensure that weapons, ammunition, medicines, and especially food actually reached soldiers on the battlefields, the Viet Minh needed a logistical system. The problem was that until late in the conflict the DRV's army lacked mechanized transport — no trucks, planes, or ships. To take the battle to the French, the DRV thus had to rely disproportionately on human and animal force drafting hundreds of thousands of civilians as porters, requisitioning tens of thousands of bicycles, rafts, horses, and oxen, all the while pushing peasants to produce more rice to feed the growing army and phalanx of civilian transporters (Figure 1). As a result, the party's decision to fight a modern war, to create a large standing army, *but* to do so via massive manpower mobilization, made this conflict an ever-more *totalizing* one in terms of its social reach.

Third, as in China, North Korea, and the Soviet Union, communists were at the helm in Vietnam. And this mattered in two major ways. Not only would the totalizing effects of the conflict expand horizontally in terms of mobilizing 'everyone' and 'everything', but it would also become vertically 'totalitarian' as the party sought to take control of the state and the society from the top down. Only then, the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) core argued from early 1949 would the required level of *massive* and *rapid* social mobilization be more readily attainable. The party thus accelerated the recruiting and training of tens of thousands of cadres — a new generation of bureaucrats — to control and thus mobilize more effectively the state, the army, and the society. In addition, Vietnamese communists went further. In what had now become one of the most violent conflicts of the Cold War, the ICP initiated a class-based social revolution in the countryside in a dual bid to mobilize peasants more effectively and *to use* the war to remake the state and society in the communist image. While Vietnamese communists never exerted 'totalitarian control' (to their great disappointment⁵), the transition to conventional warfare was crucial to *producing* the party-state, a veritable state of war. The transition to conventional warfare was thus doubly totalizing in that it mobilized an ever-growing number of people and resources horizontally all the while consolidating the party's hold over the state and society vertically. Algerian and Indonesian nationalists fighting the French and the Dutch never created divisional armies. Nor did they achieve such an intense level of modern warfare or the social mobilization and party-state institutionalization it

⁵ I argue that the party was in fact weak and hardly in control of the state and society until the early 1950s, if not later. Christopher E. Goscha, *Vietnam: Un État né de la Guerre, 1945–54* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2011), Chapter 2.

required. Only one Dien Bien Phu occurred in the history of twentieth-century wars of decolonization — in northern Vietnam.

Choosing modern war and mass mobilization

Nine months before Mao Zedong announced the birth of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in Beijing on 1 October 1949, a year before the communist bloc recognized the DRV diplomatically in January 1950, and even before Chinese military aid entered the DRV in May 1950, the ICP leadership had already chosen modern war. In February 1949, as the Chinese Red Army began to score major victories over Chiang Kai-shek's troops in the north, the ICP's acting general secretary Truong Chinh (meaning 'Long March') explained the party's decision to initiate preparations for the 'General Counter Offensive' (GCO). As is well known, this was the third stage in Mao Zedong's 'revolutionary warfare' recipe for transitioning from guerrilla operations to conventional, set-piece battle in order to defeat the enemy on the battlefield. For Truong Chinh and others, the Chinese case demonstrated that the model could work. Guerrilla warfare continued of course, but a modern Chinese People's Army was now pushing Chiang Kai-shek's forces out of China. In his address to central committee cadres in February 1949, Truong Chinh explained that the Vietnamese now had to go on the offensive, too. The balance of power was tipping in the communists' favour. American efforts to build a global capitalist system were doomed; the Marshall Plan was already a failure. The Soviet Union was stronger than ever and communism was on the march in Eastern Europe. In Asia, Truong Chinh continued, the French were faltering in Indochina; Vietnamese communists had held their own. While the Americans might intervene to try to save Chiang Kai-shek's regime, the Chinese Red Army's victory was inevitable and it would change the course of the Indochina conflict (Mao's troops had just taken Beijing). The stage of pure guerrilla warfare was drawing to a close and it was time to prepare for the third, decisive phase.⁶ The ICP fired off orders in the following months to start creating modern divisions, mobilizing the population, and consolidating a hold over the state in order to prepare for the GCO. As the general secretary put it: 'We must mobilize all of our military, political, economic, administrative, and cultures forces'.⁷

Decreasing military service and mass mobilization

Since coming to power in mid-1945, the DRV had never imposed obligatory military service in the territories under its control. In the early days, high levels of patriotism cutting across class lines had provided the bulk of recruits. The shift to the countryside with the outbreak of full-scale war in late 1946 led to increased rural participation. However, low-intensity guerrilla warfare never demanded the creation of a large

⁶ Truong Chinh, 'Tich cuc cam cu va chuan bi tong phan cong nhu the nao', 14–18 February 1949, in *Cuoc khang chien than thanh cua nhan dan Viet-Nam*, Vol. II (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Su That, 1960), pp. 131–33; and especially 'Tich cuc cam cu va chuan bi tong phan cong', 14–18 February 1949, in *Van Kien Dang Toan Tap*, Vol. 10 (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Chinh Tri Quoc Gia, 2001), pp. 25–67.

⁷ Truong Chinh, 'Tich cuc cam cu va chuan bi tong phan cong nhu the nao', 14–18 February 1949, in *Cuoc khang chien than thanh cua nhan dan Viet-Nam*, Vol. II (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Su That, 1960), pp. 137–39.

standing army. Nor did hit-and-run operations require large-scale or sophisticated logistics and transport. Commanders organized the feeding of their men on site via the local administration and militias. All of that changed with the early 1949 decision to prepare for the GCO. After all, supplying seven modern divisions would require massive amounts of manpower and food. Of equal concern was the birth of a competing Vietnamese state, the ASV in mid-1949. Allied with the French and increasingly backed by the West, the ASV was also preparing to create a modern professional army.

This is why, on 4 November 1949, the DRV imposed mandatory military service for all Vietnamese men aged between 18 and 45. The government required village and inter-zone officials to issue military service cards 'in order to list the resources in manpower for the national resistance and to point out to the young people the honor that comes to those who participate in the struggle for the nation'.⁸ In 1950, thanks to the draft, the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) came to life. It coincided with the birth of the ASV's professional army that same year, numbering 167,000 troops by 1954.

The introduction of obligatory military service was well timed. Not only did Mao Zedong announce the creation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) on 1 October 1949, without the USA intervening directly on Chiang Kai-shek's behalf, but the helmsman also led the entire communist bloc in recognizing the DRV diplomatically in early 1950. From May, the PRC began providing the DRV with a wide range of modern arms, sent two large advisory delegations, and even allowed the DRV to transfer its military academy and tens of thousands of troops and officers to southern China for training and outfitting. During its Third All Country Plenum held in early 1950, besides declaring its internationalist profession of faith, the ICP pledged to make modern war. On 19 February 1950, Truong Chinh called for the rapid modernization of the army and creation of 'main force units' (*bo doi chu luc*) in order to force decolonization on the battlefield. He did not mince his words this time: 'The strategy of the GCO stage is to counter-attack, to counter-attack to the end, not by brushing the enemy back with the wave of the hand but by wiping him out on the spot [meaning across the Indochinese battlefield], using all of our strength to send the enemy home or running to a neighboring country'.⁹ Everyone knew that 'main force units' meant creating regiments and divisions, an operational high command, a sophisticated communications network, unprecedented logistics, a medical corps, and a phalanx of communist cadres.¹⁰

⁸ Nguyen Ngoc Minh, ed., *Kinh te Viet Nam tu cach mang thang tam den khang chien thang loi (1945-1954)* (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Khoa Hoc, 1966), p. 351; 'Sac lenh so 126/SL: Ve viec dat nghia vu quan su', available at: <www.thuvienphapluat.vn> [accessed 4 June 2012]; *Tu dien bach khoa quan su viet nam* (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Quan Doi Nhan Dan, 1996), p. 664; *Bach Khoa Tri Thuc quoc phong toan dan* (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Chinh Tri Quoc Gia, 2003), p. 466; and intercepted radio DRV radio communication, 'Le président du Conseil supérieur de la Défense nationale aux présidents des comités exécutifs et de résistance des Lien Khu', 5 November 1949, signed by Pham Van Dong, box 10H2941, Service Historique de la Défense (hereafter cited SHD). For a sampling of the mass of directives issued in 1949 in support of the GCO, see the documents reproduced in *Cuoc khang chien than thanh*, Vol. II and *Van Kien Dang Toan Tap*, Vol. 10.

⁹ Truong Chinh, 'Hoan thanh nhien vu chuan bi, chuyen manh sang tong phan cong (bao cao o hoi nghi toan quoc lan thu ba)', *Van Kien Dang, toan tap*, Vol. 11 (1950) (Hanoi: Nhat Xuat Ban Chinh Tri Quoc Gia, 2001), p. 59.

¹⁰ See Goscha, *Vietnam*.

Everyone knew, too, that all of this would require Herculean efforts on the part of civilians and combatants. Despite the tough talk of bringing down the French, Truong Chinh warned that the shift to a GCO could invite American intervention, making the Indochina conflict very intense (*rat gay go*) since the two Cold War blocs would now be fighting it out in Indochina.¹¹ Those present knew perfectly well that by choosing the GCO, the ICP would ensure that the Cold War doubled the colonial conflict in increasingly violent ways for civilians and combatants. Meanwhile, the French high command soon to be led by General Jean Tassigny de Lattre welcomed his adversary's shift to conventional warfare, convinced that the French Union forces would finally be able to crush the enemy in the open (*casser du Viet* was the French expression). De Lattre also pushed Bao Dai to institute the draft in mid-1951 and modernize the ASV's army with American assistance. The Indochina War had now entered its deadliest phase. There were *three* conventional armies now in play — one French and two Vietnamese.

However, despite Sino-Soviet military assistance and training, the relative strength of the DRV's armed forces remained weaker than those of the Franco-ASV-American side. The DRV may have increased its number of main force troops to over 100,000 men by September 1950 (not counting regional and guerrilla fighters), but it was still out-numbered and out-gunned by its adversaries. Regional and militia forces possessed few modern arms, instead relying mainly on primitive weapons. The French possessed a navy, air force, and mechanized transport. As an underdeveloped, agricultural economy, Truong Chinh noted soberly: '(w)e have none of those things'. Not only could the French rely on their industrial capacity to manufacture modern arms, but they could also turn to the British and Americans for added military assistance.¹² And of course they did, as did their ally, the ASV.

However, the shift was still possible, the general secretary countered. Comrades should not be fearful of American intervention. Modern weapons were on the way from China. The GCO was attainable in a non-industrialized economy on the condition that the ICP accelerated its recruiting drive for the army, mobilized massive amounts of civilian manpower for building people-powered logistics, and produced food for both on an unprecedented scale. The draft law of November 1949 would build the regular forces. Now Truong Chinh argued in favour of full-scale mobilization of the society — the *levée en masse* of which he had dreamed for so long. This is why, he concluded, the DRV had to institute a 'special law' authorizing a 'state of general mobilization' (*tong dong vien*) allowing the government to requisition 'manpower' (*nhân lực*), 'resources' (*vat lực*), and 'talents' (*tài lực*). This included civilian porters, rice, animals, vehicles, and specialists (doctors, engineers, etc.). As the secretary general put it: 'It is imperative that we issue a decree authorizing a full-scale general mobilization in order to use state power to exploit and develop all popular forces in order to defeat the enemy army'.¹³ On 12 February 1950, the government duly approved the special law authorizing the general mobilization. It applied to both

¹¹ Truong Chinh, 'Hoan thanh nhien vu', p. 59.

¹² *Lich Su Bo Tong Tham Muu trong Khang Chien Chong Phap (1945-1954)* (Hanoi: Bo Tong Tham Muu, 1991), p. 327. Truong Chinh, 'Hoan thanh nhien vu', pp. 43-44.

¹³ Truong Chinh, 'Hoan thanh nhien vu', p. 63.

women and men, young and old.¹⁴ As Truong Chinh spelled it out: 'those who have riches must contribute money, those who have their manpower must contribute their strength, those with talents must donate them [...] This is the time that requires us to apply correctly the method of total people's resistance, total resistance' (*toan dien*).¹⁵

Of course, the DRV had mobilized people and resources since the start. In late 1945 several decrees allowed the government to confiscate and requisition real estate, materials, and people. On 24 November 1945, the government decreed the right to draft doctors and pharmacists (although compliance was anything but successful).¹⁶ But this was very different. The ICP's decision to transition to modern war in 1950 imposed unprecedented, indeed colossal, labour demands on the state. The imposition of national service, the special law on general mobilization, and labour conscription were designed to meet them. These laws also ensured that the conflict would have a more totalizing effect on the DRV's population and resources than simple guerrilla warfare. 'No longer', Truong Chinh insisted, 'is it possible for anyone to stand outside of the people's war'. He regretted that the DRV had taken over four years to implement such steps, preferring instead piece-meal decrees and insufficient, non-obligatory patriotic emulation campaigns (see below). He welcomed the fact that bourgeois and landowning families would now have to send their children to war and provide labour. Until now, 'our state has been too soft on them'. 'No one', the secretary general repeated, 'can roam the shores of the resistance war'.¹⁷

Throughout the rest of his report (and those of other top-ranking leaders), Truong Chinh added that the party had to assert its 'vertical' control over the state in order to mobilize the society 'horizontally' more effectively. This was true for the army, the police, and the local militias. It was true in education, arts, propaganda, and medicine. Patriotic emulation campaigns were not abandoned, but rather revamped, re-organized, better controlled, and expanded across the countryside under closer party direction. While the ICP did not shelve its reliance on a united front premised on nationalism, it now made a conscious effort to adopt more class-minded policies favouring workers and especially the peasants. The latter constituted over 80 per cent of the entire Vietnamese population and well over 90 per cent of the ten million people living in DRV Vietnam, of whom some six to seven million lived in central and northern areas.¹⁸ Although this shift to class was ideologically driven from on

¹⁴ *Kinh te*, p. 357. See also: 'L'Économie Viet Minh', *Indochine/Sud-Est Asiatique*, 19 (Juin-Juillet 1953), p. 28.

¹⁵ Truong Chinh, 'Hoan thanh nhien vu', pp. 63–65; Truong Chinh, 'Tong dong vien nhan luc, vat luc, tai luc de chien tang', *Su That*, 131 (15 April 1950), in *Cuoc khang chien than thanh*, Vol. II, pp. 382–86; Pham Van Dong, 'Phai kien toan chinh quyen cong hoa nhan dan de tong pha cong va kien thiet che do dan chu nhan dan Viet Nam (Bao cao tai hoi nghi toan quoc lan thu ba)', *Van Kien Dang, toan tap*, Vol. 11 (1950), pp. 186–87; 'Nghì quyết của hội nghị toàn quốc lần thứ ba về việc chuyển mạnh sang tổng phản công từ 21-1 đến 3-2-1950', *Van Kien Dang, toan tap*, Vol. 11 (1950), pp. 212–14; *Kinh te*, pp. 351–52.

¹⁶ *Kinh te*, p. 351.

¹⁷ Truong Chinh, 'Hoan thanh nhien vu', pp. 63–65; Truong Chinh, 'Tong dong vien nhan luc', pp. 382–86.

¹⁸ The number of ten million people in DRV Vietnam is found in *Kinh te*, p. 391. The French also provide the same number, see 'L'Économie Viet Minh', p. 29. My rough estimate of six–seven million people living in central (Trung bo) and northern (Bac bo) DRV Vietnam is based on the numbers provided in *Lich su cuoc Khang Chien chong Thuc Dan Phap, 1945–1954*, Vol. 2 (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Quan Doi Nhan Dan, 1995), pp. 550–54. This source claims the DRV administered two million people in the south.

high (the ICP wanted it and the Chinese and Soviets were pushing it), it was also consciously designed to attract and mobilize peasant support for the army (soldiers) and logistics (civilian labourers). In the party's eyes, the shift to modern war and the decision to begin communizing the DRV made class an increasingly important ingredient in attaining the higher levels of social mobilization needed to realize the GCO. At the same time, this shift to conventional war provided the favourable conditions for pushing through social revolution. Mass mobilization along class lines favouring the peasants and workers dovetailed nicely with the party's desire to transform society according to the communist model. For Truong Chinh, social revolution and conventional warfare were mutually reinforcing. Mao's success seemed to have confirmed it.

This would be no easy transition, however. Truong Chinh lamented the weakness of the party's leadership to this point and the social narrowness of the resistance. Despite all the talk of 'people's war', he said, and others agreed, the DRV was not truly running one. Communist cadres remained badly trained, were often inept, and generally failed to run mass organizations and emulation campaigns correctly. Military cadres focused too much on martial matters, failing to collaborate with local militias, civilians, nearby mass organizations, and relevant administrative committees. They cared little about class when it was now key to mass mobilization. Party control over the state and society was anything but 'totalitarian', to the intense frustration of the party leadership. In fact, a major problem was that the majority of peasants were roaming the shores of the war effort and the revolution. The party issued instructions to 'popularize' or 'massify' the army, the state, and itself by bringing in more workers and peasants. Truong Chinh argued that they all had a vested interest in supporting the resistance if the party demonstrated its support of their socioeconomic needs. However, if this problem 'were not fixed soon', he warned, 'then it will have an extremely harmful impact on the implementation of tasks in the upcoming revolutionary phase'. The 'time had come', he concluded, 'for the party to train cadres in the theory of the party, to educate the intellectuals allowed into the party, train a new class of intellectuals born out of the working and peasant class'.¹⁹ All of this was vital to the 'resolute shift' to the GCO and to building communism. This dual shift to modern war and social revolution now required the ICP to assert its control over its population and state. Military victory and social transformation depended on it. A true party-state had to come into being and war would help them to achieve this goal.

General Vo Nguyen Giap agreed. In a sobering address to the same plenum, the head of the armed forces explained that the regular army was hardly ready to go on the offensive. French Union and ASV regular troops outnumbered the DRV's 'main force' units. Moreover, Giap made it clear that guerrilla warfare since the outbreak of hostilities in late 1946 had not changed the strategic nature of the conflict. While DRV armed forces had certainly evolved and while the French had suffered setbacks since 1947, the Vietnamese army remained weaker than its adversary. In order to defeat the French forces, the general insisted, the army needed modern weapons, a professional divisional army, a well-trained officer corps, and more communist

¹⁹ Truong Chinh, 'Hoan thanh nhien vu', pp. 85–103.

cadres. To this end, he said, the DRV had to double indeed triple the number of recruits and vastly increase the number of political cadres in the armed forces. Lastly, Giap insisted, food would have to be procured in unprecedented quantities and transported over long, rugged distances if this modern army were to be able to fight at all.²⁰

General Giap did not mince his words. Like Truong Chinh, he stated bluntly that there was currently no 'people's war' (*chien tranh nhan dan*), nor was the struggle a socially 'comprehensive' or 'total' one (*toan dien*). 'Military cadres like to talk about people's war', he said, 'but in reality fighting for them is the sole reserve of the army'. They 'do not yet understand the role of all the people in war'. Nor did they understand 'that mobilizing all forces towards the war effort was the people state's main duty in this (new) phase'. Contrary to the widespread myth, Giap's conception of 'people's war' was not only defined in guerrilla or nationalist terms, it was also predicated on the need to prepare for conventional war by mobilizing massively the peasants along class lines and by increasing the party's control over the army. Giap bemoaned the fact that the party had not sufficiently taken in hand the army. Cadres were badly trained in ideological questions. Many officers were 'bourgeois' and cared little for theoretical notions of class or peasant problems. Giap singled this out for particularly harsh criticism, arguing that this unacceptable class view in the army was one of the main reasons why the army — and the state backing it — had failed to 'mobilize war' effectively in the countryside. In order to win militarily, the leadership had to adopt a true people's war, a peasant one, with the party firmly at the helm. Only then, he said, would the DRV be able to 'realize the general mobilization of manpower, materials, and everything for the front lines'. This, too, is what Giap meant by 'people's war'.²¹

Other top-ranking communists agreed, suggesting the importance of extending the party's reach down to the grassroots level along increasingly class-based lines. Hoang Quoc Viet weighed in promoting front work and supporting workers, while Pham Van Dong explained how to consolidate the state under party control. The Final Resolution of the Third Plenum approved this consolidation of the party internally and its control over the state and DRV society. Driving this was the transition to the GCO. As the resolution put it, the party had to control the state and the society in order 'to fully mobilize manpower, materials, and talents for war and state building'.²²

Mass mobilization and Maoist war communism

None of this was particularly new. Mass mobilization had long been driving state formation and social transformation in Europe since the French Revolution, if not since antiquity. Charles Tilly among others has written extensively on it.²³ What

²⁰ Vo Nguyen Giap, 'Nhiem vu quan su truoc mat chuyen sang tong phan cong (Bao cao tai hoi nghi toan quoc lan thu ba)', *Van Kien Dang, toan tap*, Vol. 11 (1950), pp. 122–23, 149–51.

²¹ Vo Nguyen Giap, p. 5.

²² Vo Nguyen Giap, 'Nhiem vu quan su', p. 150; Hoang Quoc Viet, 'Cong tac mat tran va dan van trong nam chuyen manh sang thong phan cong (Bao cao tai hoi nghi toan quoc lan thu 3)', *Van Kien Dang, toan tap*, Vol. 11 (1950), pp. 154–78; and Pham Van Dong, 'Phai kien toan chinh quyen', pp. 186–87.

²³ Charles Tilly. 1992. *Coercion, Capital and European States*. New York: Wiley-Blackwell, among other works by Tilly.

made the Vietnamese case so unique, at least in the non-Western world of twentieth-century decolonization, was how the ICP imported and deployed Sino-Soviet mass mobilization techniques designed not only to mobilize on a large scale, but also to remake the DRV and its population in the communist mould in a time of war.

Scholars of ‘total war’ in general and those working on communist Vietnam in particular have paid scant attention to Sino-Soviet mass mobilization techniques, their exportation and adaptation across the communist bloc, and deployment in the colonial south. With the notable exception of French scholar Benoît de Tréglodé, most authors conclude that nationalism was the driving force in this ‘nation-in-arms’.²⁴ While Truong Chinh, Vo Nguyen Giap, and Ho Chi Minh would have been the first to emphasize the power of eternal Vietnamese patriotism, they were doing much more between 1950 and 1954 than mobilizing modern nationalism.²⁵ One of the single most dangerous obstacles to the ICP’s ability to bring down the French in modern war between 1950 and 1954 was the hard, cold reality that many a peasant — too many by early 1953 — did not want to take part in this increasingly deadly conflagration putting them at the mercy of some of the most lethal industrial weapons of the twentieth century.²⁶

Little wonder Vietnamese communists looked to Moscow and Beijing not only for modern arms and diplomatic recognition, but also for proven mobilization techniques that would allow the Vietnamese to move reluctant peasants, thereby providing the soldiers and human logistics upon which decisive military victory and social transformation now depended. These techniques included: emulation campaigns, rectification classes, cult of personality rituals, new hero veneration, and of course land reform. Rather than assuming that peasants were somehow ‘born nationalist’ or ‘red’, Chinese Maoists had long recognized that the party had to find ways to politicize the reluctant peasant majority in order to take it in hand, mould it, and mobilize it against their enemies and in favour of their revolutionary project. For Mao, war provided the favourable circumstances for politicizing and mobilizing the peasantry and for building communism at the same time. Little wonder Vietnamese communists had long been following Maoist policies and models emphasizing the mobilization of the countryside. French China scholar Yves Chevrier has summed up Maoist thinking in terms which Truong Chinh would have wholeheartedly endorsed:

The politization of a (peasant) milieu that was until then located on the margins of the political order is integral to the communist mobilization of the peasantry — an activist mobilization à la Mao, one that controls and constrains at the same time as it whips up and convinces [...] The society that it mobilizes is a dominated society. Nationalism allows Maoism to avoid having to ‘liquidate’ its ‘class enemies’ in order to initiate a hegemonic strategy allowing it to take root so strongly: Mao gives himself the time and the means to promote a progressive politization (of the peasantry) within the process of mobilization.²⁷

²⁴ Benoît de Tréglodé, *Heros et révolutionnaires au Vietnam* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2001).

²⁵ See: Greg Lockhart, *Nation in Arms: The Origins of the People’s Army of Vietnam* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989); also his essay ‘In Lieu of the Levée En Masse: Mass Mobilization in Modern Vietnam’, in *The People in Arms*, pp. 208–33.

²⁶ I treat peasant resistance to communist mobilization, revolution, and state-building in a separate study.

²⁷ Yves Chevrier, *Mao et la Révolution Chinoise* (Firenze: Casterman, 1993), pp. 93–95.

Mao did not create everything. Much came from the Soviets, such as new heroes, emulation campaigns, and even land reform and rectification models.²⁸ Rectification (*zhengfeng*) and wartime land reform were Maoist specialities that appealed strongly to the ICP leadership as it sought to transition to modern war, create a party-state, and initiate communist revolution. Backed by the army and the police, tens of thousands of these bureaucrats fanned out across the countryside to organize rectification groups, study sessions, political education courses, didactic plays and songs, and implement land reform within the state and society it sought to mobilize. The helmsman had put this into practice at Yan'an by creating and deploying a new class of loyal cadres to conquer power via the politicization of the villages. Maoism provided concrete texts, methods, and experiences for consolidating the party's hold over the state, army, and society.²⁹ Vietnamese communists had been well versed in Maoism since the late 1930s and, since the communist victory in October 1949, their services were busy at work translating scores of Maoist writings into Vietnamese for training purposes. Equally important, the Chinese advisors now detached to the DRV and PAVN carried mobilization models and experiences with them. There was more to Sino-Soviet assistance than providing big guns. Modern communist mobilization techniques were now flowing from one end of the Eurasian landmass to the other.³⁰

Emulation campaigns

That said, the Vietnamese did not wait for the Chinese to arrive in order to apply Soviet-conceived 'patriotic emulation campaigns' (*phong trao thi dua ai quoc*). This programme had begun in earnest in 1948. The DRV had survived the French military onslaught of 1947; but the ICP now worried that the French would create a competing Vietnamese nation-state under Bao Dai, capable of drawing popular support away from the Viet Minh across the land. Cadres thus fanned out across the countryside where they organized patriotic emulation campaigns to generate and maintain support and legitimacy for their beleaguered state. Drawing upon personal relations, kinship ties, and local mass and salvation organizations (farmers, women, and youth associations), delegates gathered villagers together to participate in these first 'mass' campaigns. These patriotic competitions encouraged villagers, youth, women, farmers, and others to eradicate illiteracy, produce more rice, step up their local weapons production, and support the resistance financially. In the absence of military service and a general mobilization law, emulation campaigns served as the main mechanism through which the state recruited for the local militia and requisitioned labour to clear new land to increase agricultural production.

²⁸ For a theoretically informed and incisive analysis of the creation of the 'Stalinist cadres', see Brigitte Studer, 'L'Être Perfectible: La Formation du Cadre Stalinien par le "Travail sur Soi"', *Genèse*, 51 (June 2003), 92–113.

²⁹ For more on the Chinese side, see the essays in *New Perspectives on the Chinese Communist Revolution*, ed. by Tony Saich and Hans van de Ven (Amonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1995); *Twentieth-Century China: New Approaches*, ed. by Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom (London: Routledge, 2003); and more recently Elizabeth Perry's excellent *Patrolling the Revolution* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).

³⁰ Vietnamese communists would move them further into Laos.

The main idea was to organize local competitions encouraging individuals, families or villages to out-do their neighbours in a competitive but good-natured patriotic atmosphere. An array of prizes, medals, photographs, and certificates were awarded to stimulate participation. This might mean organizing competitions among villagers or having two or more villages compete against each other for a prize. Success largely depended on effective cadres as well as village and individual goodwill and personal and family ties. Patriotism was the unique *mot d'ordre* at this time; cadres had orders to avoid talk of class struggle and radical revolution. Theoretically, such patriotic competitions reached down, although not without tremendous difficulties, to the district and village levels, indeed into people's homes.³¹ They were much more common in northern and central Vietnam, where DRV military control was relatively greater, than in the south where the French military and anti-communist Vietnamese nationalist forces dominated. And of course emulation campaigns were also designed to help the party politicize peasants and bring them into its mass associations and the DRV's national community.

However, results were largely mediocre between 1948 and 1952. Villagers were often uninterested, preoccupied with their own work and concerns. Some had no time or patience for the constant haranguing, cajoling, or exhorting, no matter how patriotic. They had mouths to feed and chores to do. Local village leaders did not always appreciate the challenge to their power from these outsiders speaking a strange language. And there were simply not enough cadres to run massive levels of mobilization.³² From 1949, the ICP repeated orders to restart the emulation campaigns to help raise recruits, food, and labour.³³ Results remained poor and 'totalitarian control' a pipedream.

This bothered the communist leadership terribly. As the war entered its decisive GCO phase and the party sought to make good on its simultaneous communist revolution, this had to change. In April-May 1952, the DRV's communist core, backed by Chinese advisors, organized a major meeting in Tuyen Quang province to revamp the emulation operations (de Lattre had inflicted bloody defeats on the PAVN in 1951). The goal remained to increase production and thriftiness in order to provide rice and civilian porters for a war effort that greatly outpaced the first half of the conflict. Although patriotic competitions continued to allow the party to nationalize the masses, for the first time Vietnamese communists began to base emulation drives along clear class lines favouring workers and especially peasants. Ho Chi Minh delivered the main report explaining the significance of *thi đua* and praising the Sino-Soviet and Eastern European models on which the Vietnamese one turned. These internationalist experiences had shown that emulation campaigns not only mobilized along patriotic lines, but they also had to serve to deepen the party-state's presence and to shape the population in the communist mould. As Ho explained it, emulation

³¹ Comité de résistance administratif de la LK I, no. 8/TD, RDVN, 'Instructions sur l'élaboration de programme de compétitions patriotiques pour l'échelon de village', p. 6, box 10H2941.

³² Goscha, *Vietnam*, Chapter 2.

³³ *Kinh te*, p. 366–67 and above all Benoît de Tréglodé, *Héros et Révolution au Viet Nam* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2001) soon to appear in English translation: *Heroes and Revolution in Vietnam* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012).

campaigns 'intellectualized' the workers, peasants, and soldiers, whereas intellectuals would become 'workerized'. *Thi dua*, Ho said, would create 'new men' (*nhung nguoi moi*).³⁴

New heroes

This shift to class in 1952 was effectively linked to the simultaneous introduction of 'new heroes' (*anh hung moi*) into the emulation campaigns. New heroes refer to the 'exemplary' men and women exalted by the communist leadership in order to better mobilize people in specific sectors and social classes. Indeed, the 1952 Tuyen Quang meeting was important because it incorporated a pantheon of unprecedented class-based 'new heroes'. As de Tréglodé has shown, under the close supervision of the communist party, cadres carefully selected heroes from among the peasants, soldiers, workers, women, and youth who had distinguished themselves in their selflessness, productivity, bravery, and devotion to the party and nation. The dissemination of these 'new heroes' via propaganda drives and emulation campaigns simultaneously allowed the party to align itself with the classes it now sought to promote and mobilize socially in war and revolution. They became models to follow and emulate in the *thi dua* campaigns, such as Nguyen Quoc Tri who had fought in 'ninety-five battles' and 'had been wounded seven times'. He now held the title of 'Courageous Cadre' and '*chien si*/fighter'. Like the famous Chinese emulation hero Lei Feng in Maoist China, Nguyen Quoc Tri was a model for people to imitate. Land owners and bourgeois individuals, patriotic or not, were not.³⁵

While Vietnamese communists continued to promote patriotic heroes with links to a long tradition of martyr veneration in Sino-Vietnamese political culture, they went further by adding a new communist man to the repertoire. True, Chinese advisors provided advice, experiences, and models; however, the Vietnamese leadership willingly chose to undertake the creation of a 'new man' as part of the creation of a party-state with a firmer hold on the population. As de Tréglodé captures it astutely:

The new man could now be a cadre, a soldier, or an outstanding peasant. Emulating a hero was not simply seen as a communist invention, since Confucian tradition had used heroic tales for centuries to educate the people. Communism just increased the ways in which this could be accomplished: strict ideological control of the hero's character, massive and global propaganda techniques, and an authoritarian policy of mobilising the members of the collective under the exemplary banner of new virtuous figures. The new

³⁴ Ho Chi Minh, 'Bai noi tai dai hoi cac chien si thi dua va can bo guong mau toan quoc', 1 May 1952, in *Van Kien Dang toan tap*, Vol. 13 (1952) (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Chinh Tri Quoc Gia, 2001), pp. 174–83; and Tréglodé, *Héros et Révolution*, p. 137.

³⁵ De Tréglodé, *Héros et Révolution*, Chapters 1–3; Ngo Van Chieu, *Journal d'un Combattant Viet Minh*, trans. by Jacques Despuech (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1955), p. 184; *Kinh te*, pp. 367–69; 'Dai Hoi Toan Quoc Cac chien si thi dua va can bo guong mau', in *Cuoc khang chien than thanh*, Vol. III, pp. 244–47; and a myriad of documents reproduced in the *Van Kien Dang toan tap* volumes for the period 1948–54. On Sino-Soviet hero experiences, see: Yinghong Cheng, *Creating the 'New Man': From Enlightenment Ideals to Socialist Realities* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009); and Mary Sheridan, 'The Emulation of Heroes', *The China Quarterly*, 33 (January–March 1968), pp. 47–72.

man quickly became a high-priority stake for the government, which was trying to root its political legitimacy within a new, active force. Far from all the abstractions, the new bureaucracy of heroism generated a contingent of men and women who strengthened the government's power structures (administration, mass organisations, the army, etc.). These transformations directly reveal changes within the regime.³⁶

Rectification

Rectification (*chinh huan*) was perhaps the most important Soviet-inspired Maoist method adopted and applied by Vietnamese communists during the second half of the conflict.³⁷ As in Maoist China, the main goal of rectification in DRV Vietnam was 'reform' (*chinh*) and 'instruction' (*huan*) of good elements in the party and society. *Chinh huan* was central to shaping likeminded, reliable, and loyal cadres in the army (*chinh quan*), the party (*chinh dang*), and mass organizations (*chinh don to chuc*). Rectification was dispensed first in party schools before being diffused throughout society under the party leadership via its selected cadres. Rectification sessions corrected, improved, and above-all homogenized thinking along party lines. In these courses, the leadership inculcated the party's major themes and ideology (land reform, communist theory, emulation campaigns, new heroes, and the mass line) starting with ranking and mid-level cadres before working their way down to the local district, and even to the village levels. Cadres, then citizens, were forced to make rectification 'retreats', cut off from the outside, in order to concentrate entirely on readings, exercises, critiques, and auto-critiques. The main goal of the rectification campaign was to provoke an epiphany, a conversion to the party family and its ideology, an awakening to the 'mass line'. The cadre teacher could thus force individuals to examine their conscience and confess their social sins via self-criticism before being reborn into the wider collective identity and spreading the message themselves as good disciples.

Vietnamese communists embraced these techniques as part and parcel of the Maoist package and essential to creating a new communist-minded bureaucracy on which the party-state would turn. General Nguyen Son, who had served as a political cadre in the Chinese Red Army during the Long March and at Yan'an, first applied some rectification methods upon his return to Vietnam in the late 1940s. However, like the new hero and emulation campaigns, full-blown rectification only began in April-May 1952 as the GCO entered its most intensive phase. And the real intermediaries in the transfer of Maoist rectification practices to Vietnam were the Chinese advisors and a receptive Vietnamese leadership. In the spring of 1952, Vietnamese communists formally began organizing rectification sessions for the party, the army, and the ministerial bureaucracy, mainly in northern and central areas of the DRV.

³⁶ Tréglodé, *Héros et Révolution*, p. 65.

³⁷ The scholarship on Chinese rectification is immense. See: Vidya Prakash Dutt, 'The Rectification Campaign in China', *International Studies*, 1.1 (July 1959), 28–50; Cheng, *Creating the 'New Man'*; Peter J. Seybolt, 'Terror and Conformity: Counterespionage Campaigns, Rectification, and Mass Movements', *Modern China*, 12.1 (January 1986), 39–73. For the Soviet Union, see: Studer, 'L'Être Perfectible', pp. 92–113. For Vietnam, see: Georges Boudarel, 'L'Idéocratie Importée au Vietnam avec le Maoïsme', in Daniel Hemery ed., *La Bureaucratie au Vietnam* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1983), pp. 31–106.

The overriding goal was to take the state and society in hand in order to politicize, control, and mobilize people more effectively. Modern war and revolution and the international conjuncture required it.

The Vietnamese army's Security Department (*Cuc Bao Ve*) has recently acknowledged that, in April 1952, the party instructed the PAVN to undertake a major political 'military rectification' (*chan chinh quan doi*) in order to ensure tight party control over the army and to establish ideological unity. This internal history informs us that the army 'still had many weaknesses', most importantly 'its political level has not been raised sufficiently. Its position on social classes is not strong and not enough has been done to promote cadres with worker and peasant backgrounds'. Rectification began with cadres and then worked its way down to 'cover all personnel'. The party required biographies of each cadre, indicating class, education, and occupations. However, like land reform, rectification could have disastrous effects in the Vietnamese context. When it was applied to the Army Officers School operating in Yunnan province in southern China, 'instructors placed too much emphasis on the issue of class struggle', pushed on by even more Maoist-minded Chinese advisors. Vietnamese trainees had to rectify themselves by admitting their own social shortcomings and to 'delineate the line between the enemy and our side within themselves'. Self-criticism sessions entailed extraordinary group and superior pressure, ceaseless ideological denunciations, all of which 'went on day and night, even during rest periods, and if results were not obtained in the barracks, then the parties were taken out into the jungle where they were attacked continuously'. The instructors insisted that 'whoever sincerely confesses will be forgiven, whoever is stubborn will be severely punished, and whoever makes a contribution will receive suitable commendation and rewards'. Those who refused to admit their links to the enemy and bad social pasts were attacked as liars, and were immediately expelled and ostracized. The psychological pressure was mind-boggling. All 4,000 trainees in one rectification campaign ended up 'admitting' under pressure that they were working for the 'enemy' or had entertained 'enemy' connections in the past. 'Some people', this internal study reveals, 'were so upset that they could not stand it and committed suicide'. While investigations revealed that most of these 'confessions' were pure fabrications designed to placate accusers, Vietnamese communists, like their Chinese mentors, were intent on politicizing the army, the state, and society. Cadres were the new bureaucratic link upon which the party's vertical control would turn. Their loyalty had to be unshakeable.³⁸

Similar things happened in the various branches of the state. If Dr Ton That Tung became a celebrated surgeon in the DRV, it was in large part because he agreed to rectification in the early 1950s and even served as one of the 'new heroes' the party used to mobilize and homogenize the medical services under its control. Even the famous poet Xuan Dieu, who had joined the party early on, would find rectification a bone-chilling experience. As one of those present later recalled the experience:

³⁸ *Lich su cuc bao ve — an ninh quan doi nhan dan viet nam (1950–2000)* (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Quan Doi Nhan Dan, 2003), available at: <www.quansvvn.net> [accessed 16 November 2011 and since removed from public access] and *Lich su Tong cuc Chinh tri Quan Doi Nhan Dan Viet Nam*, Vol. I (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Quan Doi Nhan Dan, 2004), pp. 224–25.

Xuan Dieu just sat and cried [...] I was also silent as a clam. During those wild moments in the seductive darkness of night, I also went a bit crazy — Xuan Dieu was not by any stretch of the imagination alone in this regard. Nobody specifically mentioned these episodes (of homosexual love) but everybody raised their voices, raised their voices severely, harshly criticizing his ‘bourgeois thinking, his evil bourgeois thinking, which needed to be fixed’. Xuan Dieu sobbed and said, ‘it’s my homosexuality [...] my homosexuality’, choking on his words with tears flowing, but not promising to fix anything at all.³⁹

As the party consolidated its hold over the DRV from 1952, it became increasingly difficult for non-communists working in the bureaucracy or the army to roam the edges of this massive politicization of the hearts and minds of civil servants. This was especially the case for independent-minded and colonially trained intellectuals, thousands of whom had been working for the DRV on nationalist and anti-colonial grounds since 1945 and many of whom were reluctant to submit to rectification and forfeit their freedom of thought. Thousands began to leave the DRV in the face of this communization. And, as a result, the social make-up of the DRV bureaucracy soon began to change, as nationalism gave way to communism as the guiding state ideology.

Land reform

Nowhere was this more apparent than in the application of Maoist wartime land reform in northern Vietnam and its timing with the historic battle of Dien Bien Phu. This question has received extensive attention in the existing scholarship. Scholars such as Edwin Moïse, Christine White, and more recently Bertrand de Hartingh have examined it closely. What is important to underscore here is that land reform, like these other Sino-Soviet mobilization techniques, spoke directly to the Vietnamese party’s desire to attract, politicize, and move one singularly important social component: the Vietnamese peasantry. Whether it actually achieved this goal or not is another question. However, scores of recently released archival documents leave no doubt that the communist leadership saw land reform as yet another Maoist instrument by which it could mobilize the massive numbers of people needed to bring down the French in conventional war.⁴⁰ And, as in Maoist China, Vietnamese communists were convinced that land reform would not only help the party mobilize horizontally, but also a wartime agrarian revolution would allow them to extend communist control downwards with the support of the peasants, by overthrowing the ‘feudal’ order, that is, the landlords.

³⁹ Cited by Lai Nguyen Ai and Alec Holcombe, ‘The Heart and Mind of the Poet Xuan Dieu: 1954–1958’, *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 5.2 (Summer 2010), pp. 1–90.

⁴⁰ Bertrand de Hartingh, ‘L’Adoption de la Réforme Agraire par la République Démocratique du Vietnam: Pragmatisme ou Idéologie ?’, *Autrepart*, 3 (1997), 5–24; his *Entre le Peuple et la Nation: La République Démocratique du Viet Nam de 1953 à 1957* (Paris: Ecole Française d’Extrême-Orient, 2003); Edwin Moïse, *Land Reform in China and North Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1983); Lockhart, *Nation-in-Arms*; and Alec Holcombe, ‘The Complete Collection of Party Documents: Listening to the Party’s Official Internal Voice’, *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 5.2 (Summer 2010), pp. 225–42; Christine White, 1983. Mass Mobilisation and Ideological Transformation in the Vietnamese Land Reform Campaign, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 13(1), 74–90.

However, in 1949, when moving on the GCO, the ICP stopped short of calling for full-blown land reform. Reduce rents and distribute enemy land, yes; but for the time being the party stayed with the united front in order to keep everyone on board, including the patriotic bourgeois, richer peasants, and landowners.⁴¹ Pressure mounted over the next three years to implement land reform as the DRV entered into large-scale battles against the French across upper Indochina, requiring massive amounts of labour and rice to tend to the army and its battles (see below). The battles of Hoa Binh and Nasan (1951–52) — the first a victory, the second a terrible loss — had made it clear that massive people-power would be vital to sustaining large numbers of troops over a long period of time and this in places located far from the Chinese border. To take Hoa Binh, the PAVN had relied on an astonishing 333,200 civilians to serve as porters; almost 200,000 supplied the battle of Nasan in late 1952.⁴² With the GCO now officially underway, the Vietnamese leadership increasingly felt that land reform would guarantee the massive labour requirements needed to transition to conventional warfare.

Although the VWP officially implemented land reform in December 1953, serious preparations had begun in early 1953 following the Nasan debacle and Ho Chi Minh's return from Beijing and Moscow where he had come under heavy pressure to implement it.⁴³ Starting in early 1953, the party organized special land reform cadre teams, which investigated and classified the population as landlords, rich peasants, middle peasants, poor peasants, and agricultural labourers. On 25 January 1953, Ho reported to the party that the time for land reform had come. He cited its success in China in terms of increasing production and liberating the peasants from feudal control. He praised the Soviet experience before calling on the Vietnamese party to move ahead on it since it would lead the peasants to participate enthusiastically in the war effort.⁴⁴

Whatever Ho Chi Minh's reservations about letting loose a class struggle in a war of decolonization, whatever the dangers of losing important patriotic bourgeois and land-owning allies in a national front fall-out, the need to mobilize the peasant population in favour of set-piece battles, especially civilian logistics, trumped everything. Indeed, the need for a decisive military victory became all the more necessary by mid-1953, when Beijing and post-Stalinist Moscow warmed to the idea of a mini *détente* at the international level and the shooting stopped in Korea. In short, the approval of land reform in late 1953 occurred because it was seen as an essential social component in the party's attempt to defeat the French in what became the biggest modern, set-piece battle the colonial world had ever seen — the battle of Dien Bien Phu. Mobilization for the battle began in November 1953 and lasted until the French camp fell in May 1954. By promising to distribute land to the peasants in December 1953, the party sought to mobilize recruits and manpower in order to 'wipe out' the French in this valley in northwestern Vietnam.

⁴¹ For more on this policy, see Goscha, *Vietnam*, Chapter 2.

⁴² *Kinh Te*, p. 358.

⁴³ Goscha, *Vietnam*, Chapter 9.

⁴⁴ Ho Chi Minh, 'Bao Cao cua Chu Tich Ho Chi Minh', 25 January 1953; and *Van Kien Dang toan tap*, Vol. 14 (1953) (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Chinh Tri Quoc Gia, 2001), pp. 14–29.

Truong Chinh made the connection directly. The general secretary admitted that the people were increasingly weary of war and its constant requirements in terms of manpower, resources, and even their lives. Peasants had suffered the most. Land reform was not only a reward, he said, but it was also the last remaining mobilizing technique the party had at its disposal to bring down the French army before negotiations began on high. As the head of the communist party continued:

At the start of the resistance we were weaker than the enemy. We have since become stronger while the enemy has weakened. However, we have still been unable to attain a position of military strength [...]

The majority (of our population) consists of peasants. The peasants have contributed the most in manpower and materials to the resistance. If we want to preserve the resistance, we must mobilize the people, improve things for the people. Most important is the need to mobilize the peasants, improve the forces of the people.

We must have a clear and correct policy on the land question. If not then we will be unable to win over the enthusiastic participation of the peasants in the resistance, we will be unable to rely on the enormous strength of the peasant forces.

To have a correct peasant policy is still not enough. That policy must also be fully implemented and this in a timely manner. If not, because they (the peasants) will guess beforehand the sacrifices (they will encounter on the battlefields), the peasants will not be determined to fully commit their manpower or materials to the resistance. They will not be determined to fight, to win complete final victory. If the peasants lack determination, then this is extremely dangerous. One should not think that in any situation the peasants will always be on our side.⁴⁵

Contrary to the myth of the indefatigable peasant, running on non-stop levels of timeless patriotism, the general secretary admitted that the people were exhausted and increasingly less interested in continuing such Herculean and dangerous wartime tasks. 'Despite the Party's exhortations', he carried on, 'a number of peasants have revealed a sluggish attitude (*ue oai*), they do not enthusiastically produce, they do not enthusiastically volunteer for military service'. Land reform would provide the needed boost to bring down the French at Dien Bien Phu. A piece of land would give peasants a reason to sacrifice themselves for the resistance and to step up production; this in turn would reinforce the party-state's position, presence, and organization in the countryside. It would also attract those peasants who were tempted by the ASV's recruiting drives. Land reform, Truong Chinh concluded, would make the peasants want to die for the revolution. 'The time has come', he said, 'to apply a land reform policy'.⁴⁶

The stakes were enormous as the showdown at Dien Bien Phu shaped up in late 1953. In December 1953, backed by Ho Chi Minh and confident that the French would not pull out of the valley, Truong Chinh got his wish.⁴⁷ The party 'must free the peasants from the feudal yoke, it must assist the peasants, in order to mobilize

⁴⁵ Truong Chinh, 'Bao Cao cua tong bi thu Truong Chinh tai hoi nghi lan thu 4', not dated, *Van Kien Dang toan tap*, Vol. 14 (1953), pp. 48–50.

⁴⁶ 'Bao Cao cua tong bi thu Truong Chinh', pp. 50–52.

⁴⁷ 'Bao Cao cua tong bi thu Truong Chinh', pp. 48, 69.

this great force and canalize it towards the resistance in order to win victory'.⁴⁸ This, then, is how the Viet Minh's war of decolonization and revolutionary state formation became one of the most socially totalizing wars the twentieth century colonial world had ever witnessed.

No one roams the shores: Civilians in the line of fire

Anti-colonialists across the global south were certainly inspired by what they saw happen at Dien Bien Phu, not least of all the FLN. The DRV had created a professional army, executed eight sophisticated battles across upper Indochina since 1950, and mobilized over one million peasants to produce and transport food and weapons across long distances. However, behind this heroic representation of the people power that went into it lurked a darker side. The shift to modern war and the mass mobilization it required exacted a heavy price from the civilian population. Casualties increased as civilians entered quite literally the line of fire (see Figure 1). Although the DRV transitioned to modern war to a remarkable extent, the deployable levels of lethal violence remained uneven. Fielding a professional divisional army and obtaining modern industrial weapons from abroad meant little if the soldiers could not receive arms, medical supplies, and food on the distant battlefields. The biggest problem was that the DRV had no motorized transports for almost the entire duration of the war. Before 1950 local commanders had organized guerrilla logistics on the spot and such small-scale hit and run operations never entailed massive amounts of people, organization, or food. From Cao Bang on, as one Vietnamese study puts it:

This was no longer possible because the number of soldiers was larger and more concentrated, the battle fields were further away, and military operations lasted longer. Without more human manpower forces and transport, we would not have been able to guarantee the supplying of the army, nor could we have ensured the requirements of the battlefield.⁴⁹

When it came to recruiting people power, the DRV relied on its obligatory labour legislation approved on 1 September 1952, the 'policy for mobilizing labor' (*chinh sach huy dong dan cong*). It held all healthy citizens, men or women, aged between 18 and 50, to serve as porters. The government controlled all exemptions and punished slackers with prison terms of between one and six months.⁵⁰ Starting in early 1950, the ICP had begun to disperse its cadres across DRV territories to begin work with district and village authorities to recruit, organize, and mobilize civilian manpower for the war effort. These (mainly male) cadres relied on local mass organizations, kinship ties, personal relations, and the peasant, youth, and women's associations in particular, to recruit and requisition. Those who balked faced legal prosecution. Emulation and new heroes campaigns exhorted local populations to

⁴⁸ 'Bao cao cua chu tich Ho Chi Minh ve tinh hinh truoc mat va nhiem vu cai cach ruong dat', *Van kien dang toan tap* (1953), pp. 369–83, p. 376–77 for the citation; 'Thuc hien cac cach ruong dat', *ibid.*, pp. 384–456, 461–63; and 'Quan Doi Nhan Dan voi cac cach ruong dat', *ibid.*, pp. 474–98.

⁴⁹ *Kinh te*, p. 215.

⁵⁰ *Kinh te*, p. 357 and 'L'Économie Viet Minh', p. 28.

support the army. For those who joined the civilian logistics, efforts were made to take care of their families, replace their labour in the fields, and guarantee financial support to their family in the event of injury or death of the *dan cong*. Before being mobilized, these civilians received a *chien si dan cong* (*fighter labourer*) status differentiating them from colonial coolies, as one Vietnamese author insisted, but symbolizing nonetheless the militarization of hundreds of thousands of civilians now directly involved in making war. These porters also received crash courses in patriotism and socialism. Then off they marched under the guidance of the party cadres to supply the troops ahead.⁵¹ Whatever the roots of ‘peasant nationalism’ in a faraway distant past, it was an insufficient mobilizing force in the present. The party admitted as much when it instituted the draft in late 1949, then the special law on general mobilization a few months later, applied Sino-Soviet communist mobilization techniques in 1952, imposed the civilian labour law in 1952, and implemented land reform in 1953.

The number of civilians the DRV mobilized into its logistical service is extraordinary. During the first major battle of the Indochina War ending in the French retreat from Cao Bang in late 1950, the DRV mobilized 121,700 civilians who clocked in a total of 1,716,000 working days. In his bid to take the Red River Delta from the French at Vinh Yen in early 1951, Vo Nguyen Giap relied on 300,000 porters providing 2,812,000 working days in all. The number peaked during the violent battle of Hoa Binh in late 1951 and early 1952; 333,200 ‘fighter labourers’ together clocked up 11,914,000 working days. This massive mobilization expanded the conflict spatially, sending tens of thousands of Vietnamese into ethnically non-Vietnamese areas of Indochina. In 1954, 200,000 mainly ethnic Vietnamese porters followed the army as it engaged French Union and ASV forces violently in the central highlands. In 1953, as the PAVN struck deep into Laos, it brought with it 62,530 porters. Most crossed the border from Vietnam; however, communist cadres also recruited thousands from the local upland minority populations, thereby extending Vietnamese and Sino-Soviet mobilization techniques into western Indochina.⁵²

Similar things happened during the epic battle of Dien Bien Phu. The PAVN relied on 261,451 porters to supply the battlefield. Many came from the ethnic Vietnamese lowlands of Thanh Hoa and Phu Tho; however, the DRV also recruited tens of thousands of upland ethnic minorities into its human logistics and relied on Tai populations in the northwest to provide rice locally. In all, between 1950 and 1954, the DRV mobilized 1,741,381 people as civilian porters, almost all of them peasants. Together, these men and women clocked up a mind-boggling 53,787,470 working days.⁵³ The brunt of this social mobilization occurred in villages running from Nghe An and Ha Tinh to Thanh Hoa and Phu Tho on to Thai Nguyen, Tuyen Quang, and Cao Bang. With the shift from the delta to the highlands in 1952, the DRV expanded its territorial control over upland rural areas in the northwest and in the highlands in central

⁵¹ *Cong tac hau can chien dich Dien Bien Phu Dong Xuan 1953–1954* (Hanoi: Tong Cuc hau can, 1979, *luu hanh noi bo*), pp. 21–22.

⁵² See Christopher Goscha, ‘Vietnam and the World Outside: The Case of Vietnamese Communist Advisors in Laos (1948–1962)’, *South East Asian Research*, 12.2 (July 2004), 141–86.

⁵³ *Kinh te*, pp. 351 and 359.

Vietnam and into eastern Laos and Cambodia. Mobilization not only brought war to civilians in these ethnically non-Vietnamese territories but, in doing so, it introduced simultaneously the party-state and increased territorial control.⁵⁴ For upland battles, this meant that ethnic minority civilians played a much more important role in victory than Vietnamese-centred histories would have us believe. It also ensured that these non-Vietnamese civilians scattered across the uplands entered the line of fire and began dying in unprecedented numbers.

No war is 'total' and again my aim is certainly *not* to claim that this one was. After all, this mobilization only occurred in spurts and never affected all of DRV's populations all the time. Southern DRV Vietnam remained largely 'unmobilized'. My point here is that a closer look at civilian logistics and wartime social mobilization allows us to see better how the uneven shift to modern war and simultaneous communist revolution had a clear *totalizing* impact on the central and northern DRV civilian populations. For if the PAVN mobilized 1.7 million civilians between 1950 and 1954, then that would mean about one-fifth of the total DRV civilian population from central Vietnam (Trung Bo) upwards had at least several months of direct experience of war.

This high level of civilian participation in military logistics and operations confirms the collapsing of the distinction between civilians and combatants, one of the core definitions of 'total war'. The line between the home front and the frontlines also blurred. Unlike European capitals during World War I, for example, the Vietnamese war state operated from the countryside and that is where the war 'was'. As in national liberation conflagrations in Algeria, Indonesia, and elsewhere across the south, the idea of a 'home front' as some sort of civilian oasis, a city or a zone, cut off from the frontlines, was rare. Civilians and soldiers moved back and forth between the 'battlefields' and the 'home fronts'. Cadres often recruited tens of thousands of civilian labourers from 'home front' villages, sent them off to battle next door, and then returned them a few months later. Soldiers relied on nearby villages to care for the sick and injured or supply food.

In his diary of a Viet Minh combatant, Ngo Van Chieu describes how a local village assisted his battalion following intense fighting at Cao Bang in late 1950. Relying on his discussions with a young woman who had recently served as a civilian porter there, Chieu captures well how the line between the home front and frontlines broke down. On the one hand, the young female porter told him, the army had just recently requisitioned oxen carts and horses in this northern village in order to transport the dead and injured. On the other hand, the family taking care of him (including this woman) was part of a wider institution operating in DRV villages: the Association of the Mothers of Combatants. Their duty was to adopt and care for soldiers in times of need or danger. Chieu was himself enjoying the status of an 'adopted soldier' of his designated 'war mother': 'this family lodged the combatant, housed him in time of need, dressed him in civilian cloths, presented him as a close

⁵⁴ *Kinh te*, pp. 364–65. On mobilization and state-making in northwest Vietnam during the battle of Dien Bien Phu, see: Christian Lentz's fine research: 'Making the Northwest Vietnamese', *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 6.2 (Summer 2011), 68–105 and his 'Mobilization and State Formation on a Frontier of Vietnam', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 38.3 (2011), 559–86. Also see: Goscha, *Vietnam*.

relative, spoke on his behalf to the enemy authorities, and helped him rejoin his unit when it became possible'.⁵⁵ Civilian and combatant lives intermeshed in a myriad of ways.

Well-apprised of what was going on, French bombers soon began attacking the northern civilian populations in a bid to stop the enemy from mobilizing the peasant population, making little distinction between civilians and combatants. Paraphrasing the account provided by his 'war sister', Ngo Van Chieu confided the following account to his diary of how aerial bombing came to a northern village in late 1950:

At six in the afternoon, I tell you, a small enemy aircraft flew over the village. Everyone looked and shot at it overhead. Then, ten minutes later, we heard whistles and explosions. The French were bombing us. Until midnight the little aircraft hover circled the village and the shells fell. One from here, another from over there, like the (sound of the) gong on the fifteenth day (of the lunar calendar month). In the evening, the fighting approached. We suddenly saw a row of men running, taking with them weapons and two canons. They were covered with dirt and in rags. They regrouped under the big tree in the square. A dozen or so spread out in our city crying 'Grouping of all able-bodied men and women' [...] 'The enemy is but 5 km from here', said a cadre. 'We have here ammunition and arms. All able-bodied men and women, take your baskets, attach the cannons, carry your weapons for we are pulling back into the mountains'.⁵⁶

Of course, the consequences of this blurring of the line between civilians and soldiers led to horrible tragedies. In another instance, Ngo Van Chieu wrote of the hate that overcame him upon witnessing the aftermath of a French bombing of a village in 1952: 'The houses are disembowelled, the streets destroyed, while the inhabitants look on frightened by this scene of infinite desolation. A shelter, a kind of trench dug into the ground with holes was hit directly by a napalm bomb. All of the people inside it were burned alive'. Stunned by the sight of a charred, infant corpse, he asked why the French would bomb civilians. The soldiers were only passing through, he insisted. The village had no troops, 'only a few female nursing units and porters'.⁵⁷

The totalizing effects of this assault on northern DRV society spread its experience across gender lines. On the one hand, the increased drafting of peasant men into the army from 1949 meant that the burden on women at home and in the fields only increased as they struggled to feed their families and make ends meet. More women assumed positions in the local bureaucracy and militias. While they could not become soldiers, many served in the military as nurses and medics. On the other hand, the PAVN's massive manpower needs led cadres to recruit increasingly more women into its logistical ranks, pushed on by Chinese advisors. These women pushed rice-laden bikes across rugged territory, carried heavy packs over hundreds of kilometres, and rebuilt bombed out roads and bridges. It was gruelling work, sometimes lasting several months, six months at Dien Bien Phu. According to one Vietnamese study, of the 122,000 civilians mobilized for the battle of Cao Bang in late 1950 'the majority were women' and, seemingly, this would mean that at least 61,000 women were

⁵⁵ Ngo Van Chieu, *Journal d'un Combatant*, p. 142.

⁵⁶ Ngo Van Chieu, *Journal d'un combatant*, p. 145.

⁵⁷ Ngo Van Chieu, *Journal d'un combatant*, p. 217.

involved in supplying the battle. This source states that this high level of female participation remained the case for the following eight battles. If we accept that a 'majority' meant at least 50 per cent were women, then the total number of women civilians involved in military logistics would thus represent at least half of the total number of all those mobilized (1.7 million) for all nine battles, meaning about 850,000 women out of the total DRV population of ten million. Little wonder the party and the army created a host of new female models for emulation. Never in the history of Vietnam had so many women been mobilized for war, and yet, women only constituted 8 per cent of the party's membership.⁵⁸

While DRV women did not hold combat positions as their Soviet counterparts did during World War II,⁵⁹ the former often found themselves in the line of fire as porters. Dao Thi Vinh, a female porter who was about twenty-five in 1954, recalled her experience during the battle of Dien Bien Phu as follows:

I work as a porter behind the front lines. I only came to the front lines one time. On the way there, we carried ammunition and on the way back the injured. We had to climb up the slopes of the mountains or passes. Falls were commonplace. To carry a crate of ammunition, it took two volunteers. On the way back, these two could take care of one wounded person. Every two or three kilometers, we stopped and asked the injured person if he wanted to drink or piss. When he wanted water, we had to bring it to his lips. Many soldiers suffered. They moaned out of pain. We didn't know how to take care of them. All we could do was encourage them. Sometimes, they did not survive their wounds and died en route. At night, we marched and during the day we rested. We were careful when we carried the wounded. When we carried supplies and ammunition, we would sometimes sleep while walking we were so tired.⁶⁰

The uneven shift to modern war also meant that the DRV had to intensify its use of the surrounding environment and primitive forms of transportation. Thanks to the laws discussed above, cadres requisitioned carts, shoulder baskets, rafts, boats, and a few cars, as well as horses, oxen, and bicycles. Because of modern French aerial surveillance and bombing, the DRV quite literally burrowed into the surrounding environment. Camouflage became an art form in Viet Minh hands. Increasingly elaborate tunnels were dug (adumbrating those of Cu Chi). The well-known image of ingeniously camouflaged Vietnamese civilians pushing bikes down the Ho Chi Minh Trail began during the second half of the Indochina War. The Vietnamese discovered that bikes could help to increase the amounts of supplies transported per kilometre all the while better avoiding enemy detection. It was also physically less exhausting. Even the Viet Minh's navy was born 'on the inside', in complex, highly organized, river operations using carefully camouflaged rafts to transport arms and supplies via Vietnam's internal waterways. During the battle of Dien Bien Phu lasting more than six months, the DRV relied on 20,991 bikes and more than 11,000 boats (mainly make-shift rafts) to help supply the battlefield. The DRV equipped the bikes ingeniously to the point that, by 1954, they were carrying 200–300 kg of mainly

⁵⁸ *Kinh te*, p. 355.

⁵⁹ John Barber, 'Women in the Soviet War Effort, 1941–45', in *A World at Total War*, pp. 233–43.

⁶⁰ Dao Huyen Thanh, Dang Duc Tue, Nguyen Xuan Mai, *Dien Bien Phu vu d'en face, paroles de bo doi* (Paris: Nouveau Monde Editions, 2010), p. 37.

rice and foodstuffs.⁶¹ The uneven shift to modern war in logistics clearly generated an intensification in the use of geography and ecology, as Hew Strachan correctly predicted.

What is sure is that hundreds of thousands of DRV civilians experienced war first hand as ‘labour fighters’. Internal studies reveal that the life of a porter was often extremely difficult (*rat gay go*). Although cadres had exalted Vietnamese patriotism and underscored the fact that the revolution and, for Dien Bien Phu, land reform was in their class interest, none of these civilians had real military training. Precious few were party members. Emulation campaigns and competitive fun and games were one thing, but undergoing aerial machine gun fire and surviving napalm blasts were quite another. Contrary to the myth of the faceless and antlike Viet Minh soldier and porter, marching heroically on against all odds, these people had families, loved ones, children, and parents. Few, if any, had a death wish. French air attacks sowed fear into the hearts of these people as they ran for cover (see Figure 1 for a glimpse of it). Despite the efforts to camouflage these civilian porters under the jungle canopy, on many occasions French bombers struck them with deadly accuracy. During the Battle of Dien Bien Phu, French bombs killed ninety people carrying rice in a terrifying blast in Phu Tho province. It was only truly in areas near Dien Bien Phu that the PAVN turned its anti-aircraft batteries on French bombers. These men and women even found themselves on the battlefield evacuating wounded and dead as Dao Thi Vinh’s account reveals. These were all psychologically traumatic experiences for people with little if any preparation for such mind-numbing experiences.⁶²

Disease may well have claimed more lives and incapacitated more civilian labourers during the Indochina War than enemy fire. Cholera, malaria, and dysentery struck indiscriminately. Badly inoculated, the number of sick in porter groups could reach as high as 75 per cent in some cases. To make matters worse, medical care and medicine were rudimentary and scarce, with the lion’s share surely going to the fighting men. While efforts were made to tend to civilian labourers, it would appear that their overall health remained worse than that of the soldiers until the end of the conflict. Countless accidents occurred. Desertion was not uncommon in such circumstances. Lack of leadership only made matters worse. Cadre incompetence got so bad in some villages that wounded soldiers and pregnant women were forced into service; morale plummeted.⁶³

Many of those wounded or permanently disabled by war went uncared for upon their return home. At least at the outset, these disabled people often had no official support. The incapacity of the government to take care of the wounded and crippled led many villagers to avoid war, desert, or deploy a variety of passive forms of resistance knowing full well that their families would suffer if they were killed, crippled, or gone for too long. When morale tanked, the party did the only thing it knew how to do at the village level, among the porters trudging along, and even on the

⁶¹ *Kinh te*, pp. 218, 360, 221. On the DRV’s navy, see the entry for ‘navy’ in Christopher Goscha, *Historical Dictionary of the Indochina War (1945–1954): An International and Interdisciplinary Approach* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press/NIAS, 2011).

⁶² *Cong tac hau can chien dich Dien Bien Phu*, pp. 23, 272–73.

⁶³ *Cong tac hau can chien dich Dien Bien Phu*, pp. 23–24, 269, 272.

frontlines: cadres organized endless emulation campaigns, harangued the 'cowardly', gave countless speeches in favour of patriotism and social revolution, and dispensed on the spot rectification sessions.⁶⁴

Death knocked hardest on rural doors in central and especially upper Vietnam. While communist Vietnam has refused to make public the number of civilian casualties the DRV suffered during the nine years of war, the majority must have occurred during its second, violent half. Given that this period coincided with the 'peasantification' of the professional army and civilian logistics, the overwhelmingly rural population of DRV Vietnam must have taken the hardest hits. In other words, the poor died in much higher numbers in the DRV during the Indochina War than the well-off and educated classes. One can only speculate as to the grief that struck rural families across central and northern DRV Vietnam before moving its way into Laos and the central highlands. Given the underdeveloped state of rural Vietnam's medical services, to say nothing of a total lack of psychiatric support, tens of thousands of Vietnamese and ethnic minority people continued to carry the scars of war with them. The government did provide pensions and some veteran homes and asylums; but the loss of loved ones, working family members, must have created enormous economic and social challenges about which we know next to nothing. In short, at least one-fifth of the DRV's population of ten million people experienced some form of mobilization, with 1.7 million serving as porters. While no figures exist for the army, the number serving in the armed forces between 1950 and 1954 must number at least half a million. Upper DRV Vietnamese society arguably had one of the highest per capita 'experiences of war' of any non-Western society engaged in colonial war in the twentieth century.

Conclusion

We should thus not be surprised to learn that there were limits to this mass mobilization.⁶⁵ People, poor peasants above all, pushed back and some checked out. As we have shown elsewhere, the PAVN soldier could also refuse to go over the top. Indeed, at the height of the battle of Dien Bien Phu, a wave of resistance almost denied the DRV its historic victory over the French.⁶⁶ Internal studies reveal that civilian porters cracked too; many deserted their units and returned to their villages, while others crossed over to the Franco-ASV side. Ngo Van Chieu's little 'war sister' told him that her lover never returned from battle. He joined the other side and was not alone; neither was the 'war sister' in experiencing lost love.⁶⁷

What is too often lost in the nationalist-minded accounts of the DRV is the fact that there were limits to this double 'total war' of decolonization. By the time the French camp fell at Dien Bien Phu, much of the DRV rural population, like the

⁶⁴ *Cong tac hau can chien dich Dien Bien Phu*, pp. 42–50, 111–112, 143–53, 273; *Kinh Te*, pp. 216–17, 226.

⁶⁵ I treat this subject in detail in a forthcoming study.

⁶⁶ See Christopher Goscha, 'Hell in a Very Small Place: Cold War and Decolonisation in the Assault on the Vietnamese Body at Dien Bien Phu', *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, 9.2 (2010), 201–23.

⁶⁷ *Cong tac hau can chien dich Dien Bien Phu*, pp. 111–12, 153. The DRV has not revealed how many of its civilian labourers and soldiers deserted during the Indochina War.

peasant soldiers, was exhausted and hungry. When the communist leadership signed on to the Geneva Accords dividing Vietnam into two halves, Ho Chi Minh and Truong Chinh both cited this widespread social exhaustion as an important reason for ending the conflict now rather than risk taking on the Americans and their unparalleled arsenal of modern weapons. As the Politburo's resolution authorizing acceptance of the accords argued: '(W)e must also clearly stress that because it has been a protracted war, our people have had to contribute enormous amounts of manpower and materials. If the war drags on, then signs of fatigue could emerge creating increased difficulties for us'.⁶⁸ By shifting to modern war on uneven terms, and by implementing the revolutionary transformation of the state and the society at the same time, the Politburo may have gone a long way to victory, to creating a party-state, but it had also exhausted its own people. And this may well be an important *social* reason explaining why the communist leadership signed the Geneva armistice on 21 July 1954.

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⁶⁸ 'Nghỉ quyet của hoi nghi ban chap hanh trung uong lan thu sau mo rong', 15–17 July 1954, *Van Kien Dang toan tap*, Vol. 15 (1954) (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Chinh Tri Quoc Gia, 2001), p. 224.