

NORTH VIETNAM - USIA 3-part article - 1958

NORTH VIETNAM — A COMMUNIST SHOWPIECE WITH CRACKS

By George Benson
(Author of articles on communism and foreign affairs)

Part I

3/58

Communist North Vietnam, which Moscow and Peiping have tried to make a showpiece of communism in Southeast Asia, has developed serious problems in its economic and social life. This is plain to anyone who reads the press of that area.

The North Vietnam regime is troubled by corruption within its bureaucracy, apathy in the Lao Dong (Communist) Party cadres, and widespread disaffection among the masses, especially the farmers.

One symptom of the general resentment toward the regime's "land reform" program is the use of various devices for avoiding full payment of oppressive agricultural taxes.

An article in the official party newspaper Nhan Dan (Hanoi) of January 15, 1958, listed numerous irregularities in delivery, storage, and payment for rice, the common medium of taxes-in-kind. Blame for the unsatisfactory situation prevailing in "many localities" is placed by the paper on both the peasants and the party cadres or state agents at the village collection points.

According to Nhan Dan, these shortcomings are due in part to official negligence and lack of organization, but mostly to peasant resistance which takes the form of withholding good rice and substituting damp, poor-quality paddy, mixed with pebbles, as tax payments.

A favorite device, said the paper, is for the farmers to plant the larger part of their fields in good rice and smaller areas in the heavy, inferior grade known as mo. They pay their taxes in mo rice and keep the best rice for their own consumption or for selling to the state-run "trade service" centers, where average prices are higher.

The paper also stated that many of the farmers smuggle out rice that has already been weighed by tax collectors and have it weighed again. They also cover inferior rice with a layer of good rice during the weighing, or ask the agents to weigh poor rice that has already been rejected as substandard.

The Nhan Dan article complained that state payments are inequitable. "The distribution of the money was far from rational," said the paper. "Some regions had too much money; some others did not have enough, so they (the agents) had to buy on credit."

Further, said the paper, "a number of small dealers sat in front of the (state) stores, bought the paddy from the peasants at low prices and queued up to sell it to the state-run trade service at higher prices." In such transactions, collusion of the state agents was indicated.

Other evasions of agricultural taxes were reported by Nhan Dan on December 28, 1957. These included fraudulent declarations of cultivable,

or they state that fields are lying fallow and thus entitled to tax rebate, when "in reality, these fields were not cultivated due to drought."

Since prolonged drought conditions have been widespread, the paper's comment implies that victims of drought should have paid in kind for crops they did not raise!

A curious form of tax evasion is also referred to in the article, which mentions "abnormal" increases in the annual birthrate in many localities and cites comparative figures for 1956 and 1957. The increase in a single year ranged from 2 percent to 11 percent.

The paper asks: "Can there actually be such an abnormally high rise in birthrates?" And it answers the question by pointing out a relation between decreased rice collections due to "undue exemptions" and "wilful misreckonings by some of them (taxpayers) for the sake of their own interests." In short, scores of villages claim additional children who exist only on paper, in order to gain tax exemptions that reduce their rice deliveries.

The Vietnam News Agency on January 29, 1958 released a "report of the Peasants' Liaison Committee" (an agency of the Lao Dong Party), which gave a roundup on the "activities of the first socialist (Communist) bases of agriculture in North Vietnam."

The report gives an optimistic account of the growth of the "mutual-aid team" movement, notes the increase in agricultural cooperatives, and refers to the progress of state farms.

The report says that, "taking part in the transformation of the present individual farming are the state farms, the first bases of the socialist economic sector in agriculture entrusted with the task of guiding economy in the countryside onto the collective path."

This statement makes clear that the system of "mutual-aid teams" -- now claimed to have more than 80,000 members -- is destined to give way to farm collectivization, and that the cooperatives are another step in the same direction.

The report contains a significant admission: "With the discovery of errors committed during land reform, the mutual-aid movement suffered from a temporary setback. Many teams either dissolved themselves or remained inactive."

This is an understatement. The peasants themselves, driven to desperation by the excesses and savage brutalities attending "land reform," brought the regime to such a pass that it was compelled to modify the whole program and abandon some phases for the time being.

This situation was rationalized by Party stalwart Truong Chinh in a long article serialized in Nhan Dan last November. Conceding "shortcomings and errors" in the program, he declared: "Reactionaries hiding behind the cloak of religion and a number of landlords revolted, fomented disorders, and disturbed peace and order in a few localities." Not the "landlords" but the peasants were in revolt.

Truong Chinh thus glossed over a period of frightfulness that left the agricultural economy shaken to its roots and millions of peasants embittered by a regime that had promised plenty after "liberation." Farmers who suffered from this reign of terror now feel justified in cheating the government of taxes.

Following the lead of Communist Party chiefs Nikita Khrushchev in the USSR and Mao Tse-tung in Communist China, Truong Chinh attacked "revisionism." He said: "The level of enlightenment and the standpoint of the party cadres on a number of questions became irresolute, their faith in past principles wavered, and their fighting spirit grew weak."

A lengthy editorial in the Party organ Hoc Tap, January 1958, attempts to explain away the results of the policies of the past three years.

The journal attributes the party's current difficulties to the "imperialists" who "engineered the counter-revolutionary riots in Hungary" -- an event that "made its impact felt in our own country."

The "bad elements" who, according to Hoc Tap, "exploited as best they could our party's shortcomings" include "reactionaries in religious disguise and the die-hard landlords." Also, a "few city capitalists, and the bad elements among the intellectuals, artists, writers, and among the democratic parties availed themselves of the opportunity to attack our party in the fields of politics, economics, culture and thought."

However, at another point in the editorial, the writer concedes that "it has not yet been possible to rapidly develop our national economy; and it has not yet been possible to greatly improve the life of the working people, army men, cadres, and employees."

The party spokesman then warns: "For the sake of the fatherland's common interests, our cadres and people must continue to undergo hardships in order to build up our economy and raise production."

Soothing syrup is administered to the taxpayers in a Nhan Dan editorial of January 22, urging greater vigor in the collection of the 1957-1958 winter taxes.

The paper uses the standard Communist argument that "under the imperialist and feudal domination, taxes are a super-economic means of sweating workers and making them poorer and poorer." But, says the writer, taxes in North Vietnam are "one of the instruments used to build up socialism" (communism)...and of "increasingly raising the material and cultural conditions of living of the whole people."

(Editorial note: The tax rate in North Vietnam has more than doubled since the end of French rule in 1954.)

In this welter of persuasion, self-justification and excuses for party shortcomings, a note of anxiety is detectable. Opposition to the regime is being harshly suppressed, but it still smolders below the surface.

The three-year record of the Lao Dong (Workers') Party -- the dominant element in the "United National Front" -- is one the party's apologists would like to have forgotten. It is a chronicle of unexampled barbarities inflicted not so much on "capitalists" and "landlords" but on the workers and peasants who were led to believe that with "liberation" their living standards would be materially improved. Instead, their economic hopes have been frustrated and they have lost all vestiges of personal and group freedom.

- - - - -

NORTH VIETNAM --- A COMMUNIST SHOWPIECE WITH CRACKS

By George Benson
(Author of articles on communism and foreign affairs)

Part II

North Vietnam basically is an agricultural region. Of approximately 13.5 million Vietnamese now living under Communist rule, more than 90 percent are small farmers and former tenant farmers. The agricultural policies of the North Vietnam regime therefore are of vital importance to the area's overall economy.

The rosy promises made early in 1954 to the peasants by Ho Chi Minh, leader of the Lao Dong (Communist) Party, were followed almost immediately by the first stage of "land reform."

It was soon evident that "land reform" in practice meant the confiscation of land held by the more prosperous farmers, without compensation. At the same time, the Communists inaugurated a campaign of oppression and persecution of property-holders as "capitalists" and "landlords."

As the "Red terror" mounted, hundreds of thousands of anti-Communist Vietnamese sought refuge in South Vietnam. Few "capitalists" and "landlords" of any consequence remained. Nevertheless, the

Communists -- in order to carry out the Marxist-Leninist dogma of the "class struggle" -- continued their terrorist activities. In these operations, they sought to pit impoverished and landless peasants against the middle-class farmers who, in general, are the most efficient producers.

This "revolution in the countryside," as it was called, was in full swing in 1955 and proceeded roughly in three phases. In the first phase, confiscatory taxes forced many of the peasants to sell their personal belongings and even their farm implements, in order to meet the tax exactions.

Next, the program for the "reduction of rents" compelled one-time landlords to repay 25 to 100 percent of the rents allegedly "extorted" from former tenants. The result was that this class of farmers had left only their dwellings and land. The third phase -- "land reform" itself -- was the most drastic.

The "land reform" program in turn advanced by stages -- each more severe than the preceding one. First came the "popular movement," which involved the selection of peasants at the lowest economic level in each village to become instruments of the Communist-inspired "class struggle."

Under the direction of party cadres, these dupes were told to accuse intended victims of being "landlords," regardless of whether or not they had ever had tenants. Each village was then cordoned off and after the villagers had been driven to a frenzy of hatred by baseless accusations, the victims were executed, often to the accompaniment of torture.

After the villagers had been "educated" in the "class struggle," there was a general assignment of all but the poorest farmers into rigid classifications, largely according to their economic status. Peasants were even ostracized on the charge of having had "relations" with landlords.

The systematic terrorism and injustice of these proceedings bore heaviest on the middle-class farmers and even affected many of the abler members of the Lao Dong Party itself in localities that had given Ho Chi Minh substantial support.

At a later stage, confiscated land was divided among a favored class of poor peasants and veterans. However, the plots allocated to families on this basis were too small for economic usefulness. In the rice-rich Red River delta area, for example, the holdings averaged approximately one and one-third acres for a family of three persons.

Excessive taxes-in-kind further dimmed any prospect of making a living on these small parcels of land. Under the former French tax system, a farm family that produced some 2,000 kilograms (4,400 pounds) of rice annually paid a tax in kind of 120 kilograms or 6 percent. Under the Communist system, the same family must deliver 240 kilograms, or 12 percent of the crop per harvest.

In some instances the tax squeeze runs as high as 20 percent of the family earnings, but these are only basic rates; additional levies and exactions materially increase the percentage taken by the state or its local subdivisions.

The next step was to try to force all those struggling with a marginal income into a collective pattern, starting with the "exchanging labor" form of "cooperation." A parallel drive by party cadres concentrated on setting up "mutual-aid" teams.

The intent of this program was apparent in an editorial in the Hanoi Newspaper Nhan Dan of June 6, 1955, which said in part:

"Cadres must lead the exchanging labor campaign and explain to the people that after the land reform policy is implemented, the peasant farmers must follow the way which, step by step, will lead them to collectivization of production."

By the summer of 1955, the regime and the entire area were in serious economic and productive difficulties. In July, Ho Chi Minh visited Moscow and Peiping and obtained large loans and promises of technical aid. In September, Moscow delivered 150,000 tons of Burmese rice and Communist China sent some cloth.

In the spring and summer of 1955 reports of famine in several provinces, with thousands dead of starvation, were discounted by the Hanoi regime, but on January 5, 1956, the Hanoi radio announced:

"Thanks to the help from our brotherly countries (Communist regimes), we reduced famine early in the year (1955) and averted it late in the year."

Despite help from the Communist bloc, it was apparent in 1956 that North Vietnam's economy had developed serious flaws. Not only were

a great many farmers defaulting on tax payments; also, popular restiveness was increasing because of the scarcity of consumer goods and price inflation.

In finding scapegoats for the blunders of "land reform," Ho Chi Minh and his inner clique blamed three highly placed Communist leaders, including Truong Chinh, head of the Lao Dong (Communist) Party and a veteran of the Indochinese Communist movement.

However, the eclipse of Truong Chinh was of short duration. In the December 6, 1956, issue of the party organ Thoi Moi he advised the workers that in the "work of leadership" it was necessary to "use the army and security forces firmly." This was a reference to the suppression of peasant uprisings in Nghe An Province in November.

On December 9 the Hanoi radio explained that "mistakes and shortcomings of state agencies" and a lack of raw materials had caused a serious shortage of consumer products. But not all the trouble was due to lack of raw materials. The newspaper Nhan Dan from time to time has revealed many instances of bureaucratic incompetence, official corruption, and general inefficiency in the operation of state agencies.

For example, Nhan Dan of March 22, 1956, disclosed that inexperienced officials in charge of cotton mills at Nam Dinh had wasted public money to the tune of almost 600 million piastres and had taken "advantage of their position to embezzle more than 20 million piastres from the Government."

The open-cast coal mines of Hongai and Campha, according to Nhan Dan of August 26, 1957, did not meet their production quotas for the first six months of 1957 owing to "bureaucratic incompetence and neglect of workers' education and living standards."

"Many machines," said the paper, "became out of use, so that production made slow progress. Therefore few tasks were given to the workers, and their pay has been diminished. On the other hand, the price of food and a number of goods necessary to the workers has been increasingly raised."

Another facet of life under communism was described by a technician from Eastern Europe, who had observed Vietnamese students undergoing training in his country. The technician commented:

"They (the students) have not got the know-how; they destroyed as 'colonialist' the invaluable French records and plans for exploitation which could have saved us years of trouble, and frankly, they are often not even willing to learn."

About 1,000 students from North Vietnam are being trained in Soviet bloc technical schools, at great expense to Hanoi, which pays for their tuition and upkeep abroad.

The emergence of a new class of bureaucrats -- venal and luxury-loving -- was described in a story printed in the Hanoi periodical Cuu Quoc of September 8, 1957. The article recounted the rise of one Minh, director of the Duyen Hai factory in Haiphong, from modest living to a life of corruption and self-indulgence.

"Minh became increasingly corrupt," the paper said, "especially after marrying a wife who appeared at first glance to be a woman of wide experience. While the couple treated the factory as their own property, embezzling machinery and funds freely, living in luxury in the house of the former French owner, and driving frequently to Hanoi in a Frigate car bought with the factory's money, any worker who protested was threatened with discharge...Little by little, Minh acquired all the negative characteristics of the bourgeois class, i.e. ruse and tyranny. Nowadays, all over the country there are many similar cases of corruption."

The North Vietnam regime boasts of great strides achieved during the past three years in agricultural and industrial production, and in certain limited segments of the economy, these claims may be justified. But whatever gains have been made, their benefits do not accrue to the great mass of the population, who find that "liberation" has brought neither personal freedom nor freedom from want.

Meanwhile, according to authentic reports, the regime's officials need armed escorts in touring many parts of the countryside, while not only workers and peasants, but Party cadres have become apathetic toward Communist indoctrination. In some places underground resistance to the central government at Hanoi continues.

Although the aged Ho Chi Minh retains considerable prestige, his regime has no appeal for the "proletariat" it was supposed to serve and elevate. The real beneficiaries are the Party bureaucrats and fellow-travelers of use to the Party or its program.

- - - - -

NORTH VIETNAM — A COMMUNIST SHOWPIECE WITH CRACKS

By George Benson
(Author of articles on communism and foreign affairs)

Part III

The Communist regime of North Vietnam, known as the "Democratic Republic of Vietnam" (DRV), bears no functional or organic relation to the Constitution of 1946, under which it was set up.

The Constitution itself is a relatively liberal document, in the western tradition of democratic parliamentary government. Few of its provisions have been observed since its promulgation. Although the DRV maintains a facade of government by a "Fatherland Front," in which several "democratic parties" are represented, the regime is wholly dominated by the Lao Dong (Workers' Party), the Communist Party of North Vietnam.

As an example of Communist inconsistency, the Hanoi regime on June 14, 1955, passed a law protecting freedom of religion -- a right contained in the inoperative Constitution. However, the ruling Lao Dong Party, according to an official broadcast of July 4, 1955, "does not recognize the existence of divinities, but always strives to make propaganda for scientific socialism (communism) and patriotism."

It is noteworthy that the centers of the November 1956 rebellion were in the prevaillingly Catholic provinces of Thanh Hoa and Nghe An. Peasant uprisings in these areas and elsewhere were a direct result of the savage persecution and repression carried on by Communists in the guise of "land reform."

Prior to the partition of Vietnam in 1954, 98.7 percent of all tilled land in North Vietnam was worked by its owners. The landlord class numerically was a very small one.

When the Communists came to power, approximately 900,000 people-- citizens of all trades and occupations -- sought refuge in South Vietnam. Few landlords of any consequence were left in the North. Nevertheless, Communist persecution was rampant throughout the entire region.

The total number of "landlords" or -- as now conceded by the Hanoi authorities -- of poor peasants mistakenly or deliberately classified as such who were killed, imprisoned, or exiled, has been estimated at more than 50,000. The Hanoi regime toward the end of 1956 sought to overcome the disastrous effects of this campaign by a program known as the "correction of mistakes." This brought to light widespread instances of harsh injustice.

The Lao Dong official organ Thoi Moi in April 1957 published a series of confessions by party cadres. One of these was a complaint by a worker who no longer enjoyed popularity with his fellow villagers.

"There is no reason," this man wrote, "for me to be hated by the whole village and the whole country. I dare no longer go anywhere.

When the team (party cadre) was here, the comrades pointed at this man and said he was a wicked landlord, then pointed at the other man and said he was a counter-revolutionary. The loudspeaker did not stop announcing. Therefore at times I thought it (the accusation procedure) was real." The writer admitted that all the accused whom he had denounced were innocent.

An editorial in Thoi Moi of October 21, 1956, declared that "violations of democratic freedoms of the people become inevitable when there are no clear laws fixing the relations between the people and the cadres." This comment evades the party dictatorship issue, which places the party above any "laws."

The number of persons unjustly imprisoned was so large that the official newspaper Nhan Dan on November 22, 1956, printed a special article on the "correct attitude" that should be observed by released prisoners. These victims of Communist injustice were advised not to "harbor ill feelings against the party and the government, which illegally imprisoned them and took their property."

The "Red terror" was due in part to an informer system set up by the Lao Dong itself. Imitating the Chinese Communist regime, the Hanoi authorities not only organized a police network which operates in every city block and rural hamlet; they also established a nationwide corps of voluntary informers, recruiting men, women and children for the purpose of ferreting out "counter-revolutionaries." This unofficial network supplemented the activities of the notorious "land reform committees."

Despite repressive measures, local police and militia were unable or unwilling to take effective action against their fellow villagers during the 1956 uprising. Two regular DRV army divisions were despatched to quell the rebellion.

Following the exposure of manifold abuses of Communist authority, the regime in the winter of 1956-1957 introduced a slight lessening of the party dictatorship. This paralleled the Chinese Communist "liberalization" period of "one hundred flowers blooming," decreed by Chinese Communist chief Mao Tse-tung. However, as in Communist China, when criticism of the regime came from all sides, the Hanoi authorities abruptly suspended the "liberal" tendencies and a new wave of suppression set in. By last summer, the party's absolutist rule was completely re-established.

During the brief period of tolerance, criticism of the regime came in large part from the intellectuals. The literary and critical journals, Dat Moi (New Soil), Van Nghe (Literature and Art), and Nhan Van (Humanism) were in the vanguard with articles charging that freedom of thought was not permitted and that literature had been reduced to servile repetition of party formulas.

The new weekly, Nhan Van, was soon faced by a strike fomented by Communists and was closed down by the government after the fifth issue.

The official publication of the Vietnamese Artists and Writers Association, Van Nghe, weathered the wrath of the party but was soon forced into line, as was Dat Moi.

By January 1958, Van began to feel the weight of party censure. On January 23 the army paper Quang Doi Nhan Dan launched a violent attack on the literary journal, claiming that the "cultural viewpoints of the Nhan Van group were being revived through the medium of Van."

According to Chien Ky, author of the article, Van's chief sin was its criticism of "rude interference of politics (the party) in arts and literature." Chien Ky declared further that "in the present ideological struggle, if one does not side with the proletarian standpoint, one must side with the bourgeois standpoint, there are no other standpoints."

The army critic also warned Vietnamese writers: "Our world concept is that of Marxism-Leninism, and our art and literature can never be divorced from the requirements of the revolution nor from the party leadership."

The editors of Van announced that the paper would be temporarily suspended in order to review its "mistakes" and reorganize the staff. The suspension became permanent when the Hanoi authorities announced on February 23 that the weekly had been suppressed. The broadcast stated that strengthening party leadership over art and literature is the "business" of the party, and that this calls for a "strong political viewpoint."

This is in line with steps taken by the regime last year to tighten literary censorship. In February 1957, intellectuals attending an Arts and Letters Congress were warned that their literary output must conform to party directives and policies.

In the meantime, the situation of the farmers gives little hope for amelioration in the near future. Although some "land reform" features have been modified, an aftermath of the trumped-up "class struggle" remains -- a decree of March 1953, which determines the social status of every citizen of North Vietnam, by rigid formulas, according to land ownership and labor employment.

The "discrimination principle" embodied in the law, which distinguishes "land owners" from "rich farmers," employs a complicated percentage system to define various social categories.

For example, a farmer who hires two agricultural workers for "one whole year, or if exploitation under any form is equivalent to the product of two agricultural workers for one year, the family under consideration will be classified as members of the rich peasantry."

However, says the law: "The hiring of a worker on a yearly basis, or for one season, or for four months, or for ordinary work for 120 days, should be counted as hiring for one year." Thus, a farmer who hires two men for seasonal work, on a transient basis, is classified as a "rich peasant." Penalties against this class are severe, and are extended to the family and children of "wealthy farmers."

The arbitrary character of the social classification system is revealed by the provision that states: "Daughters of land owners, rich peasants or bourgeois who marry workers or laborers enter into

the laborer or peasant class as soon as they have spent one year providing for their own subsistence by labor. If they do not work, or as long as they have not completed one year of work, they remain in their original social class."

Similar provisions apply to children of land owners and to those adopted by laborers or peasants.

The dour comment of Thoi Moi regarding "violations of democratic freedoms of the people" neglected to point the real moral: that the regime operates in complete disregard of its own Constitution, and therefore the acts of Communists are outside of any "clear laws" passed by the DRV legislative body, the National Assembly.

The National Assembly, purporting to represent all Vietnam, was provisionally "elected" in 1946 (heavily weighted with Communist candidates) for the purpose of drafting a Constitution. According to the Constitution, this body was to be transformed into a "People's Parliament," thus becoming the official legislature of the DRV. But in fact, the National Assembly after 12 years remains unchanged, and no new elections have been held for a constitutional parliament.

Up to June 1957, the National Assembly had met seven times, but at its sixth session only 244 members out of a theoretical total of 444 attended the meeting. Little is discussed at these meetings except routine legislation dictated by the Lao Dong Party, or rubber-stamp confirmation of party decrees.

In the meantime, the DRV regime rules by decree. Only a few of the most important laws, such as Land Reform, are even endorsed by the National Assembly. In the field of administration, the Communist Party and the military hierarchy are paramount. This situation is nowhere provided for in the 1946 Constitution, which exists only on paper.

- - - - -

32458