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**“No Responsibility and No Rice”: The Rise and Fall of Agricultural
Collectivization in Vietnam**

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Communist leaders in Vietnam attempted to use agricultural collectivization to transform a poor, agrarian country into a modern, socialist nation with an industrialized economy. Collectivized agricultural production lacked sufficient economic incentives for Vietnamese farmers; they preferred to produce privately for household consumption or the free market. State-initiated reforms to collectivize agriculture failed to improve the performance of the agricultural sector and eventually the Vietnamese Communist Party was forced to abandon collectivization altogether. Once farmers were freed from collective labor and could pursue private production for the free market, Vietnam’s agricultural output skyrocketed.

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In the early 1950s Vietnamese communist revolutionaries formulated grand plans to use collectivization to transform a poor, agrarian society into a modern, socialist nation with a nationalized economy. The bulk of Vietnam’s population lived in rural areas, which were also the center of most of the country’s economic activity. Industrial production was limited and an urban proletariat was almost nonexistent. Any fundamental change

to Vietnamese society would have to begin in the countryside and Vietnamese communists chose collectivization as the instrument of change. Though the organization of collective production evolved from its inception in the early 1950s to its end in the late 1980s, the overriding goal of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) during this period was to create a system of collective agricultural production under state control. Despite its cooperative form, the attitudes of individuals undermined collective efforts.¹

Vietnam, in fact, possessed several characteristics that should have made its agricultural sector suitable for collectivization. The VCP began its revolutionary struggle in the 1940s with substantial rural support, thereby granting the party significant legitimacy among the rural population. The party used this legitimacy over subsequent decades to defeat French, American, Chinese, and Cambodian invaders. Furthermore, during communist rule--since 1954 in northern Vietnam and 1975 in southern Vietnam--no significant organized internal opposition has threatened the regime with counterrevolution. The ability of the regime to survive, even after the collapse of communism in the West, indicates that the state has enjoyed a certain level of political power over Vietnamese society, power that should have enabled the state to direct the form and substance of agricultural production.²

In addition to a favorable political environment, economic factors should have facilitated increased agricultural production under collectivization. The productivity of land upon which rice is cultivated can be inexpensively increased by applying more labor, even in conditions of land scarcity.³ In Vietnam, collectivization tied farmers to state-created cooperatives through a system of residential registration (*ho khai*), which linked cooperative membership with access to food and rural employment and ensured a large, fixed supply of agricultural labor, even during periods of war. Also, the VCP

deliberately structured cooperatives to simultaneously increase labor productivity and dampen consumer demand to hasten the creation of capital needed for industrial investment. VCP leaders believed that collective labor in cooperatives would be more rationally allocated and more likely to generate economies of scale than traditional household-based agricultural production. Pricing state-manufactured and -distributed consumer goods at an artificially high level, in combination with the state appropriating a large share of the harvest from cooperatives at below market prices, would generate a price scissors effect beneficial to the state. ▼

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Yet Vietnamese government statistics indicate that per capita agricultural output, cultivated land area, and land yields declined during the war against the Americans and their South Vietnamese allies from 1965 to 1975, which forced North Vietnam to import 15 percent of its food. By the late 1980s, more than a decade after the end of the war, collectivization still failed to meet the expectations of the VCP. Vietnam remained poor and unindustrialized, the country's economy was in crisis, and millions of Vietnamese suffered from hunger and malnutrition. Faced with the possibility of political unrest, in 1988 the VCP abandoned strict adherence to collectivized production and legalized the private production that was already occurring on a widespread basis in the countryside. By 1991 private household enterprise produced 97 percent of Vietnam's agricultural goods by value, accounting for nearly 40 percent of the country's gross domestic product. In 1992 Vietnam became the world's third largest exporter of rice.⁴ Farmers who produced little for the state under collective production from the late 1950s through most of the 1980s were quite able to privately produce surpluses for the free market in the early 1990s, suggesting that collectivized agriculture lacked sufficient incentives for farmers. ▼

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In 1953 VCP leadership decided that favorable conditions existed for proceeding further with its social revolutionary agenda for North Vietnam. Party leaders believed that the creation of a socialist society necessitated that a state-managed collective economy replace private control over land, labor, and the exchange of goods. The natural place to begin building socialism was the countryside, as it contained the bulk of Vietnam's population and most of the country's economic activity. Although many rural areas were not yet under permanent control of the VCP in 1953, the military situation against the French colonial regime had improved greatly since the war for independence began in 1945, and the need for a broad, united-front strategy that minimized antagonizing North Vietnam's upper class while trying to maximize popular support against the French had lessened. It is also probable that VCP leaders recognized the need to consolidate the party's position among the poorest residents of the countryside, who had suffered greatly during the war against the French, and whose socioeconomic conditions had not improved.⁵

Since the beginning of the anti-colonial war, communist policies designed to benefit the rural poor had consisted mainly of measures such as rent and tax reductions, debt annulments, and the periodic redistribution of village-held communal lands. However, the basic structure of landownership had not changed significantly. The VCP calculated that in 1953 individuals classified as landlords and rich peasants composed 3 percent of the rural population, but owned almost 22 percent of the land. Poor farmers owned about 51.8 percent of the land but, together with the landless, formed 58 percent of the rural population. Assessments of rural poverty based solely on landownership masked the fundamental problem of overall land scarcity in North Vietnam. Farmers who employed landless field laborers often did not own large amounts

of land in absolute terms, and any substantial changes in rural economic structure would require the appropriation of land from a "large number of peasants with above average holdings." An extensive allocation of land to the poor and landless therefore required that the Communist Party dispossess those classified as "middle peasant[s]," many of whom had received land from earlier redistributions.⁶

In December 1953 the VCP leadership enacted the Land Reform Law, which specified a redistribution of land from individuals the VCP classified as landlords and rich peasants--who gained most of their income from renting out land or who hired others to work it--to those Vietnamese the VCP considered to have insufficient landholdings to provide an adequate income. Local land reform committees appropriated property from many farmers, even those with little land. Many farmers were punished or killed arbitrarily, ultimately forcing VCP leaders to concede in a number of speeches in 1956 that "errors," "excesses," and "injustices" had occurred during the implementation of land reform. Despite the considerable social upheaval and widespread violence during land reform, there is a clear indication of improvement in agricultural production: from 1954 through 1958 the annual per capita production of paddy rice increased by over 60 percent.⁷

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The VCP then launched a drive to consolidate farmers into mutual aid teams (MATs, *to doan ket* or *to doi cong*). In MATs, farmers retained ownership of land and control of crops but were encouraged to assist each other during periods of peak labor demand by jointly working in one another's fields. VCP leaders believed that MATs would produce greater returns for their members than traditional farming because more hands would be working the same field, which would--in theory--raise output. Farmers in MATs were compensated as a group for their pooled labor. A MAT's harvest was parceled out

to each team member at the end of a growing season, so the returns earned by each MAT member depended on the actions of other MAT members and were not under the full control of the individual. To maximize their returns and minimize losses, MAT members expended valuable time and effort to monitor the work of others or participated as minimally as possible in MAT projects, making them unpopular among farmers. The number of MATs peaked at over 150,000 in mid-1956; however, a year later the number decreased to less than half because many households had returned to their traditional ad-hoc method of exchanging labor only during the harvest. According to official reports, farmers were “uninterested” in maintaining MATs on a year-round basis, and as a result MATs in and of themselves appear to have made little to no positive effect on crop production.⁸

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On the heels of MATs came a campaign to create agricultural production cooperatives (*hop tac xa san xuat nong nghiep*), which obligated farmers to perform collective labor and fulfill procurement quotas imposed by central authorities. Farmers in cooperatives were organized into production brigades (*doi san xuat*) under the oversight of brigade leadership committees and the cooperative’s committees for management (*ban chu nhiem* or *ban quan ly*) and inspection (*ban kiem tra*). Managers awarded workpoints (*cong diem*) to brigade members for their collective labor and were worth a portion of the cooperative’s net harvest. Brigade leaders were responsible for recording the workpoints earned by the brigade’s members. The leaders were originally ordered to assign workpoints according to the difficulty and quality of collective labor performed for the cooperative by brigade members, but uneducated and unskilled cadres rapidly found it impossible to differentiate between the work performed by hundreds of cooperative members. Cadres soon awarded a fixed number of workpoints to cooperative members

based solely on the time spent performing collective labor, a method of compensation that “rewards neither effort nor skill, but it is straightforward to administer.” Because the cooperative paid farmers solely according to the time each member performing collective labor, they were not penalized on an individual basis for poor-quality work. Farmers saw no incentive to work harder than their neighbors and shirked collective labor as much as possible.⁹

A variety of factors further reduced the rewards of collective labor in the cooperatives. State purchase prices for agricultural goods from the cooperatives during the 1960s were less than a third of market prices in North Vietnam. Cooperatives also bore the cost of an inefficient, top-heavy administrative bureaucracy that was often corrupt, while participating farmers were paid only after the cooperative had received the costs of production and fulfilled state quotas. As a result, per capita grain production in North Vietnam steadily declined during the 1960s and 1970s. From 1961 to 1975 North Vietnam’s annual per capita paddy rice production dropped from 269 to 194 kilograms, as shown in Figure 1.¹⁰

When the VCP established agricultural production cooperatives in North Vietnam it permitted rural households to privately produce some crops on small plots of land. These lands were called “5 percent” plots (*dat nam phan tram*), from an April 1959 resolution of the 16th Plenum of the VCP Central Committee that reserved 5 percent of the arable land within each cooperative’s boundaries for distribution to individual households. Although the VCP intended collectivized agriculture to supply the “vital needs” of rice and other staple foods and viewed the 5 percent plots as part of a supplementary “family economy” (*kinh te phu gia dinh*), they soon became an important means for farmers to produce food and income while avoiding collective labor. From the

early 1960s through the early 1970s, farmers in North Vietnam earned between 60 and 75 percent of their income from the private cultivation of their 5 percent plots. These plots were not officially allocated any state-supplied resources, yet yields from household-cultivated gardens were often two or even three times the yield per hectare of cooperative lands.¹¹

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<Figure 1>

War in South Vietnam caused North Vietnam to re-assign many cadres and male heads of households from agricultural cooperative duties to the military. Though rural areas enjoyed a labor surplus even during periods of heavy conscription, cooperatives became more dependent on the actions of those workers--primarily women--who remained. Similarly, funds previously allocated to the agricultural sector were redirected to subsidies for heavy industry and the production of defense-related materials. Cooperatives in the North were expected to produce more with less for both the military and urban residents.¹²

In an attempt to meet the state's wartime procurement demands, some cooperative managers allowed households to extend their private plots into cooperative lands in exchange for a percentage of the families' harvests from these plots. Some cooperatives disobeyed regulations by forming contracts with individual households that allowed these households to privately cultivate or raise livestock on cooperative land in exchange for delivering a quota of crops to the cooperative. These household contracts (*khoan ho*) permitted farmers to dispose of any over-quota surplus on the free market. District officials usually ended these arrangements as soon as they were discovered, but

in some cases local forms of household contracts became so well entrenched that abolishing them required intervention by provincial or even national authorities.¹³

In August of 1974 a major party conference on agriculture was held in Thai Binh. Le Duan, the general-secretary of the VCP, declared that small-scale, family-organized farming could not meet Vietnam's economic needs, despite evidence that private plots cultivated by households produced much more than the collectively worked fields of cooperatives, even while being denied state-supplied resources during a time of war. Le Duan ordered that cooperatives be consolidated and enlarged to redistribute manpower and reorganize production "better and more rationally." Official statistics show that expanding the size of cooperatives did nothing to halt declining rice production in North Vietnam.¹⁴

Though VCP leaders expected the end of the war against the Americans to end North Vietnam's economic malaise, the lack of economic growth during the 1960s and early 1970s continued after South Vietnam's defeat in 1975. The VCP's attempt to collectivize southern Vietnam, especially the highly productive Mekong Delta, did not allow the state to obtain more crops for use as food, foreign exchange, or investment capital. As happened in North Vietnam two decades earlier, the VCP initiated land reform to equalize landholdings in southern Vietnam soon after its victory. In 1976 the VCP Politburo authorized a land appropriation and redistribution campaign in southern Vietnam and banned private land sales. The VCP also outlawed the private ownership of farming equipment, tried to confiscate irrigation pumps, tractors, tillers, and water buffalo from farmers, and prevented families from raising livestock. Farmers were classified as poor or rich according to the amount of land they owned, which was re-appropriated from those judged to have an excess and redistributed according to

specific formulae: in the Mekong Delta, families were assigned 0.1 to 0.15 hectares of rice fields for each working adult and 0.08 to 0.1 hectares for each child under eighteen or adult over sixty years of age.¹⁵

After redistributing land in southern villages, VCP cadres formed production collectives (*tap doan san xuat* or *to doi san xuat*) in the late 1970s as a precursor to full-blown cooperatives. Theoretically, farmers in production collectives voluntarily combined their labor to collectively cultivate, harvest, and sell crops to the state, all under the guidance of party cadres, but retained nominal control over their land and its cultivation. Production collectives differed from cooperatives in that farmers managed them privately; in cooperatives, the cultivation of crops, the division of labor, and the distribution of the harvest was bureaucratically managed and the state owned the land.

Farmers who grew crops in production collectives or in cooperatives were subjected to a food obligation (*nghia vu luong thuc*) policy that was implemented in 1978 and 1979, which required them to sell a quota of grain to the state at fixed prices in exchange for state provisions of fertilizer, gasoline, bricks, and consumer goods at subsidized, below-market prices. When the state initiated the food obligation policy, free market prices for grain were eight times higher than state prices. State-supplied goods were usually inferior in quality, insufficient in quantity, and delivered late, which interrupted planting and thereby hurt production.¹⁶

Southern Vietnamese farmers resisted collectivization in a variety of ways. Some farmers sold land that had been distributed to them by cadres back to previous owners or refused to perform collective labor. According to the Vietnamese newspaper *Nhan Dan*, farmers sold grain at “speculative prices” on the free market that should have been turned over to the state, and they also used it to distill alcohol and feed hogs. In the

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Mekong Delta, state food procurement decreased by more than half between 1976 and 1979. Farmers wrecked machines and slaughtered livestock before they could be expropriated by the VCP, and neglected those that became collective property. The number of functioning tractors in the Mekong Delta declined by 76 percent between 1975 and 1983, and nearly every province in southern Vietnam suffered from a shortage of draft power by the early 1980s. By the end of 1982, only 0.6 percent of households in the entire Mekong Delta belonged to cooperatives. Just ten agricultural cooperatives had been created in Ho Chi Minh City since 1975, and only six new cooperatives had formed in Ben Tre and Long An provinces. In some areas the number of cooperatives increased over time merely because they were subdivided into smaller units.¹⁷

In November 1981 VCP Politburo member Le Thanh Nghi gave a relatively frank assessment of collectivization in the South, which he declared had absorbed only “9 percent of peasant families and 7 percent of cultivated land.” Farmers’ free market transactions made it “impossible” for them to be collectivized; sharecropping, wage labor, and money-lending were widespread, and cadres had become corrupted and “misuse[d] their authority to exploit peasants.” The state was never able to collectivize agricultural production in southern Vietnam, which left it unable to appropriate significant quantities of grain from southern farmers.¹⁸

According to official statistics, Vietnam’s national rice production fell from 11.83 million tons in 1976 to 10.60 million tons in 1977. The following year, production was even less at 9.79 million tons. In the Mekong Delta, state food procurement decreased from 950,000 tons in 1976 to only 398,000 tons in 1979. The decline in production caused serious economic problems for Vietnam, which were compounded by a cessation of trade with China after Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia in December 1978 and China’s

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subsequent retaliatory attack against Vietnam's northern border in 1979; excessive typhoon rains also destroyed crops in several provinces. Annual per capita rice production dropped to 157 kilograms in northern Vietnam by 1980, and both the Mekong and Red River deltas produced less rice per capita than they had at the end of the war in 1975, as shown in Figure 1.¹⁹

While the party proceeded with collectivization in southern Vietnam, national rice production fell by over 17 percent in the three year period from 1976 to 1978. Food in northern Vietnam grew increasingly scarce, and so in January 1981 the party's Central Committee Secretariat issued Directive 100. Directive 100 permitted farming households to take over the planting, tending, and harvesting of crops--the labor-intensive phases of cultivation--on land contracted from cooperatives for one to three years, in exchange for delivering to the cooperative a specified quantity of grain at each annual harvest. Though similar to the household contracts that had appeared illegally in the 1960s and 1970s, the state still required farmers to purchase plowing, services, seeds, irrigation, fertilizers, and pest control services from the cooperatives. Any crops grown in excess of the quota could be sold by the household to the cooperative at a higher bonus price or on the free market. Directive 100 indicated that the VCP had "shifted from a focus on procurement as the priority to a focus on raising production, believing that this would itself raise procurement."²⁰

The initial effects of Directive 100 were dramatic, but they did not last. National rice production increased from 226 kilograms per person in 1981 to 256 in 1982. Annual harvests of food crops rose from 15.0 million tons of paddy equivalent in 1981 to 17.8 million tons in 1984. State procurement of staple grains soared from 1.4 million tons in

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1979 to almost 3.8 million tons in 1984, enabling the VCP to direct larger supplies of agricultural products to cities for consumption as food.²¹

Many Vietnamese farmers took advantage of Directive 100's provisions in ways that undercut the VCP's effort to assert control over agricultural production; for example, farmers negotiated extremely low contract quotas with cooperatives so that more grain could be sold at a higher price on the free market. But despite the better incentives contained within Directive 100, farmers still found private household production more attractive because of the way in which many cooperatives implemented the new policy. Cooperatives sometimes arbitrarily raised quotas to force farmers to cover the cooperative's operating costs, or they failed to supply agreed-upon services to household-contracted lands. Others lacked the cash and goods required to purchase crops from farmers at bonus prices. Cooperative managers also confiscated fields or attempted to prevent farmers from cultivating previously abandoned land.

One farmers' representative in Vinh Phu Province complained to government researchers that crop production after Directive 100 was "still strictly controlled" by cooperative managers, who were "biased" in the way contracts were distributed. The allocation of land to households "lacked fairness" and farmers earned an average of only 96 to 144 kilograms of food per year from their contracts with cooperatives. One party district secretary from Ha Bac Province said that Directive 100 "created discontent among a majority of farmers" and caused financial problems for cooperatives because many farmers in the district did not deliver enough produce to meet their contracts. Official surveys in northern Vietnam revealed that, under Directive 100, farmers were able to retain only 20 percent of the crop yield after local communist cadres charged for production costs, taxes, and other fees. The VCP then launched another collectivization

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drive in southern Vietnam, with few practical results. The percentage of rural households in southern Vietnam that belonged to cooperatives only increased by 1 percent, while the average size of cooperatives decreased by over 25 percent during the same period.²²

In 1985 the VCP promulgated an avalanche of new regulations that were intended to stimulate the economy but sparked hyperinflation instead. Farmers, disgruntled by declining incomes earned from collective labor, began to abandon cooperative fields. National annual rice production declined from 16.0 million tons in 1986 to 15.1 million tons in 1987; in the Mekong Delta, rice production dropped by nearly 9 percent from approximately 7.1 million tons to less than 6.5 million tons during the same period. At the beginning of 1988, several provinces in northern Vietnam--including Hanoi--faced food shortages, causing famine that affected approximately 40 percent of the northern rural population. Severe hunger threatened more than 3.5 million individuals. In May the Vietnamese Army newspaper reported that eight of Vietnam's nineteen northern provinces were hit by famine, where many people went without food for weeks.²³

Faced with severe shortfalls in grain deliveries to the state and the growing threat of famine, the party began to encourage private, family-based production in the late 1980s. This change, along with other economic reforms instituted during this period, became known as *Doi Moi* or "renovation." New policies began to emerge in November of 1986 when the Council of Ministers approved Resolution 146, which urged cooperatives to allocate unused land to individual households for family use. For the first time, the government allowed farmers to privately raise livestock without limits. However, households were prohibited from privately working the fields that were listed in the production plans of state farms, cooperatives, and production collectives, even if

the land was idle--thus, most farmland was technically still subject to collective production.

Real reform came on April 5, 1988, with the release of the Politburo's Resolution 10. Resolution 10 formally abolished the requirement that farmers perform collective labor for the state. Though cooperatives continued to exist under Resolution 10, households in them were granted responsibility for all phases of cultivation, and farmers gained the right to either sell crops to the state at negotiated prices or to private individuals and merchants at market rates. Tenure on land contracted from cooperatives was extended from three to fifteen years. In addition, the cooperatives lost their monopoly on the provisioning of plowing, seeds, irrigation, fertilizers, and pesticides, and farmers could now choose to purchase these services from the cooperative if they wished or from private suppliers.²⁴

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Agricultural productivity exploded once farmers were free to engage in private production. Vietnam's production of rice increased from less than 242 kilograms per person in 1987 to 293 kilograms per person in 1989. Vietnamese rice exports more than doubled from 0.91 million tons in 1988 to 1.95 million tons in 1992, despite crop losses caused by flooding, making Vietnam the world's third leading exporter of rice, and by the late 1990s, Vietnam's rice exports often exceeded three million tons per year.²⁵

At the same time, state involvement in agricultural production shrank drastically as cooperatives disintegrated. In the Mekong Delta, the number of cooperatives listed in official statistics decreased by a factor of six from 1990 to 1994, and in the Red River Delta in northern Vietnam, the number of cooperatives decreased by 36 percent during the same period. Meanwhile, the number of cadres employed by cooperatives shrank by as much as 50 percent. Official statistics, comments from farmers about the higher than

market cost of agricultural goods sold by the state, and an assessment by the Food and Agricultural Organization all indicate that the rapid growth in agricultural production in Vietnam after 1988 was “achieved with very little public investment in water control, agricultural research and extension, or rural market infrastructure.”²⁶

Individuals’ attitudes towards collectivization also reveal why private production was successful. I interviewed twenty-three individuals in 1996 to assess the attitude of farmers in northern Vietnam toward collectivized production and their reactions to its collapse. During the same year, I conducted follow-up interviews with eight individuals, and three were interviewed a third time as well. The interviews were semi-structured, a technique that has been shown to be methodologically sound when used by foreign researchers in situations where participant observation is not possible. All interview subjects except one belonged to households where agriculture provided the primary source of income, and subjects had varied levels of economic status. Interview subjects ranged in age from early twenties to early seventies; some subjects were identifiable as members of the VCP and some were military veterans, or their spouses, who had fought during the war against the Americans.²⁷

The first interview site was a rice-growing village in a rural district within Hanoi’s boundaries, across the Red River from the city’s urban center. The village had no industrial enterprises except for a few family-operated brick-making kilns, and widespread underemployment. The second interview site was an island in the Red River itself, accessible [from Hanoi](#) by a bridge limited to bicycle and foot traffic or by rowboat. The land on the island was administered jointly by People’s Committees of precincts on either shore of the river, and rented out by these committees to farmers who migrated annually from villages in the Red River delta to grow vegetable crops on the island’s

land. The island had no irrigation and suffered monsoon flooding and dry season drought. The third interview site was a rice-growing village approximately one-hour's drive south of Hanoi. All interviews were conducted entirely in Vietnamese without the assistance of an interpreter or the prior authorization of government officials. Responses to interview questions were recorded by means of contemporaneous note-taking. Names of interview subjects have been omitted to protect their anonymity.

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The farmers old enough to remember collectivization in the 1960s and 1970s describe it as a period of hunger and scarcity and complained of being forced to eat potatoes and tubers instead of rice, or even chewing betel nut to avoid hunger pangs. A forty-year-old VCP member, formerly employed by the city of Hanoi but engaged in raising pigs and cultivating roses for sale on the market, remembered the cooperatives as having "many work teams (*nhieu doi*) but there was no responsibility and no rice (*khong co trach nhiem, khong co lua*) and living standards were low. We lived by workpoints but there was little rice (*an cong diem ma it com it thoc*)." One seventy-two-year-old farmer recalled that the cooperatives had "too many expenses (*hop tac xa chi phi nhieu qua*). So if the harvest was bad then we didn't have enough food to live on (*thu hoach thieu thap, khong du an*)." Another forty-seven-year-old farmer who served on the village People's Committee said that "the upper levels of the state didn't know anything about agriculture (*cap tren nha nuoc khong biet nong nghiep*)."²⁸

All interview subjects said that they greatly preferred private production to the collective labor in the cooperatives. According to a fifty-one-year-old woman, Resolution 10 meant that "if you work a lot, then you have a lot; if you work a little, you have little (*ai lam nhieu thi nhieu, ai lam it thi it*)." A forty-five-year-old farmer who served on the village's People's Committee believed that "the cooperative was a waste of time. [Now]

there's a lot of trade. Farmers have the initiative in production; things are balanced. There's alcohol to drink, food to eat, and better health." A thirty-year-old farmer who had served in the army said that after the promulgation of Resolution 10 life had shifted to "self-production and consumption . . . you don't have to hand everything over to the state. Before Doi Moi, you couldn't grow what you wanted [because] the cooperative decided everything. Everyone had to grow one thing, even if other crops grew better or were more profitable. Life is much better now, because prior to Doi Moi, rice production was always low and the state ran everything. Now production is a lot higher. . . . Compared with 10 years ago, living conditions have improved five times over."²⁹

Survey results indicated that the vast majority of rural Vietnamese believed their living standards improved after collective production in cooperatives had ended in 1988 and would continue to improve in the near future. In 1996 and 1997 over fifteen hundred applicants to a rural micro-loan credit program administered by an American non-governmental organization and the Women's Union of Vietnam, a state mass organization, were asked to rate on a scale of one to ten their living standards relative to the average living standard in their villages before and after Doi Moi. They were also asked to estimate on a scale of one to ten what they believed their living standards would be relative to the average living standard in their villages in the year 2000. A response of five meant that the applicant felt his or her living standard was equal to the average living standard of his or her village; a response of ten meant that the applicant felt his or her living standard was the highest in the village. This method of asking subjects to rate their living standards was used in previous studies in Vietnam and provided "a subjective assessment of the quality of rural Vietnamese life as perceived by

rural Vietnamese” independent of external observation. The method was pilot-tested in my interviews and was easily understood by all subjects.³⁰

On average, applicants believed that their living standards had improved significantly since the beginning of Doi Moi. Over 80 percent of the applicants who stated that their main source of income was agriculture believed their living standards were below average prior to Doi Moi. At the time of the survey, only 12 percent of the applicants believed their living standards were above their village’s average living standard; however, over 79 percent felt their living standards would be above average by the year 2000. Similar results were found when applicants were grouped by geographic region (northern, central, or southern Vietnam), income level, education level, amount of land cultivated by the applicant’s household, and the amount of labor possessed by the applicant’s household. Statistical analysis demonstrated that these variables were not significantly associated with the amount applicants believed their living standards had improved since the end of collective production or with the amount they believed their living standards would improve in the near future. The only group that on average reported lower living standards after Doi Moi was composed of the 7 percent of respondents who identified themselves as unemployed, and this group felt that their relative living standards had declined by an average of only 1 percent.³¹

Collectivization was the norm, not the exception, in communist states during the twentieth century. Communist leaders thought that collectivization would facilitate rapid industrialization of agrarian economies by bringing rural populations “under the political control of the state.” Through collectivization, farmers could be forced to supply agricultural goods to the state at below market prices, and they could also be forced to buy industrial and consumer goods at artificially high prices. The capital thus bled from

the countryside could be used by the state for industrial investment, either by exporting state-appropriated agricultural goods to earn foreign exchange, or by supplying food at subsidized prices to urban factory workers to reduce industrial labor costs.³²

Reality was very different. In the Soviet Union under Stalin, mass terror, starvation, and killings made it possible for the state to disregard human and economic consequences, but in other communist states there was a distinct difference "between the power of the state to formulate policy and the ability of the state to implement it." The economic growth that did occur in these states was caused primarily by the misallocation of resources and a disregard of costs. Preventing decreases in agricultural production required an increasingly larger amount of state-supplied economic resources, and improving the efficiency of collectivized agriculture proved "difficult, if not impossible."³³

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In Vietnam, collectivized agriculture lacked enough economic incentives for it to be supported by farmers. Vietnamese farmers resisted collective production and instead focused their energies on private production, which had greater economic rewards. Despite changes to its policies, the VCP failed to make collective production attractive to farmers and eventually the party was forced to abandon its policy of collectivization altogether and permit unfettered private production for the free market.

1. Andrew Vickerman, *The Fate of the Peasantry: Premature "Transition to Socialism" in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam* (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1986), 33--35.

2. At that time the party was officially known as the Vietnamese Workers' Party. I have used Vietnamese Communist Party (*Dang Cong San Viet Nam*) throughout for consistency.

3. Francesca Bray, *The Rice Economies: Technology and Development in Asian Societies* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1986), 5.

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4. Vickerman, *The Fate of the Peasantry*, 210; Nguyen Sinh Cuc, *Nong Nghiep Viet Nam, 1945--1995* [*Vietnamese Agriculture, 1945--1995*] (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Thong Ke, 1995), 310.

5. Vickerman, *The Fate of the Peasantry*, 73--74; Tan Teng Lang, *Economic Debates in Vietnam: Issues and Problems in Reconstruction and Development (1975--84)* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1985), 4.

6. Vickerman, *The Fate of the Peasantry*, 45, 65, 93; pages 57 and 58 make the important point that there are inherent inaccuracies in the figures for landownership and class structure of this period, owing largely to the fact that party officials created estimates for intervening years by extrapolating from pre-war data.

7. Vickerman, *The Fate of the Peasantry*, 83--87, 98--104, 111.

8. [Vickerman, *The Fate of the Peasantry*, 151](#); Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet, "Wobbly Foundations: Building Co-operatives in Rural Vietnam, 1955--61," *South East Asia Research* 6 (Nov. 1998): 206.

9. Frederic L. Pryor, *The Red and the Green: The Rise and Fall of Collectivized Agriculture in Marxist Regimes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 184.

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<H>Figure 1: Annual Per Capita Rice Production Under Collectivization in Vietnam.</H>

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