CHAPTER III

NLF: POLITICAL MOBILIZATION
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The Revolution must rely upon a broad national front against imperialism, solve the peasant question, organize a people's army, have the brotherly support of the people and proletariat of other countries and be led by the party of the working class.

-Ho Chi Minh

To a large extent, the success of the NLF is to be attributed to its success in motivating and mobilising the Vietnamese to work together against the United States and build a new, united and socialist system. Without mobilization a mass-based revolution cannot take off. The Vietnamese revolution was indeed a mass-based revolution, but it is surprising how the bulk of literature on this revolution, with the exception of some outstanding studies, views mobilization myopically.

Two kinds of view exist on mobilization, both unacceptable. One is the romantic notion of mobilization being a spontaneous revolutionary movement; an opposite view sees it primarily as coercion bereft of any revolutionary fervour. The correct position, as it generally happens, lies somewhere in between. Mobilization is an organizational process that involves both recruitment

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1Ho Chi Minh, Selected Writings (Hanoi: FLPH, 1962), vol. 4, p. 277.
activities and the peasants' cognitions and motivations upon entering the Front. Secondly, mobilization occurs in a cultural context, and marks a broad process of social change.²

The backdrop for successful mobilization, however, has to be people's disenchantment with the existing order of things. The Vietnamese society of the time provided enough grist to this growth of frustration. Before going into the details of the NLF's mobilization effort, therefore, a delineation of this background would be in order. Diem's government in Saigon was a puppet of the United States, with no roots whatsoever among the people. Discontent was brewing in the countryside, and the appeal of the revolutionary armed forces was growing.³ To preempt their success and contain Saigon's growing isolation from the countryside the United States increased the number of military advisers in Vietnam. President Kennedy authorized these advisers to accompany Saigon army units on combat


operations down to company level. The number of advisers mounted to 11,000 in 1962, when the United States also began providing them helicopter transport and air cover. US military advisers trained the RVN troops and even supervised the rapid expansion of a village civil guard. Programmes in psychological warfare, village administration, technical assistance, and propaganda were established. New tactics were formulated in which helicopter mobility and new weapons, including Napalm were devised to seize the initiative. It was inevitable that this alienated the villages with their nationalism insulted, and to that extent made them more at home with the cadres. 4 Diem, meanwhile, insecure of his claim to being the Head of State, also decided to take a tough stand against the growing popular turmoil, heedless of the advice of his administration. The list of abuses by his government kept mounting day by day. Seeking to silence dissent, prominent people were arrested and tortured; elected village chiefs were replaced with stooges of the government; Catholics from central provinces were appointed to administer Mekong Delta districts; civil servants were enrolled in the dictatorial and personalist Revolutionary Workers (Can Lao) Party of Diem's brother Nhu; a monument was erected for two national heroines carved in Madame Nhu's likeness; government funds were allocated for

4 Tran Van Don, Our Endless War (San Rafael: Presidio Press 1978), p. 150.
Madame Nhu's personal use; an arbitrary ban on dancing was imposed; all the while corruption within the ruling circles grew by leaps and bounds.5

While Kennedy paid lip service to "winning over the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people", the actual emphasis turned towards counter-insurgency. In a measure intended to cut off the "guerrillas" from the peasants, the government thought up the Strategic Hamlets programme whereby the peasants would be resettled so that they would no longer be accessible to the Front cadres.6 In a "mammoth example of 'social engineering' known to the non-communist world", the programme was launched in the Mekong Delta in 1962 and by August that year it was extended to the whole country. By end September the regime claimed that more than one-third of its total population had been resettled. Provincial officials, terrified of offending Nhu7 and anxious to receive US aid earmarked for the programme competed to build as many Strategic Hamlets as possible. One American commented that "if you stood still long


6 The Front supported the peasant to rely and at the same time gave the peasants the security to allow them to choose freely between the South Vietnamese government and the Front. See N. Chomsky, The Backroom Boys (London:Fontana Collins, 1973), p.8.
enough they would throw a piece of barbed wire around you and call you a strategic hamlet. 8

Villagers were herded into the security of the hamlets, sometimes at gunpoint, while areas surrounding the hamlets were declared "open zones" where aerial and artillery bombardment could take place. While this scheme helped to line the pockets of the provincial chiefs and gave Diem the illusion of controlling his own people, for the people being resettled it entailed, in the words of a US Marine Colonel, "forced resettlement, physical oppression, coercion, and political persecution by the club". 9 His ancestral land was sacred to the Vietnamese and formed part of his social identity. Dislocation from these roots disoriented him, "thus exposing him directly to the political movement that could best provide him with a new identity". 10 Even those who did not join the Front were, by the very act of relocation, turned against the government. 11

9Chomsky, n.7, p.9.
10Fitzgerald, n.2, pp.10-11.
11Thus, by proving that the government could not save a refugee hamlet that it had promised to protect, the NLF made it more and more difficult for a hamlet to cast its lot with the government. See Milton E. Osborn, Strategic Hamlets in Vietnam (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, Southeast Asia Programme, Data Paper no.55, April 1965), pp.32-35.
One of the avowed aims of the Strategic Hamlets programme had been to allow the peasants a free choice between the government and its opponents. An American official later commented that

One of the reasons for its failure was that the Vietcong supporters and agents had managed to remain in the hamlets and continue their subversion. Clearly that was disastrous: there could be no free choice between the government and the communists while the Vietcong were allowed to exist.12

Diem could not prevent the Front controlling one-fifth of the village population and infiltrating the urban areas, and as one observer remarked, the circle of artillery and barbed wire around the Strategic Hamlets "enclosed a political void that waited for the NLF".13 By 1963, according to official US figures, about one half of the population of South Vietnam supported the Front.14 As the construction of Strategic Hamlets ceased, ARVN units avoided combat and development programmes also ground to a halt. The reduced pressure, combined with the protest in the South made it easier for the Front to find recruits.

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14Fitzgerald, n.2, p.125. According to the author the size of the Party's Southern branch grew to nearly 700,000 by late 1963.
As American operations spread, the resulting high losses to the civilian population did more to turn the population against the Saigon regime and its foreign ally than any counter-insurgency programme could make up for.15 Though the number of US troops in Vietnam was continuously increasing, the myth that they were there merely as "advisers" was maintained long. By 1962 there were 10,000 American troops in Vietnam. Their practices of torture were notorious which only increased the political unrest in South Vietnam, encouraged desertion from the army and heightened the disillusionment of the people with the regime.18 The use by the US Army of toxic sprays against the rice fields of Vietnam, defoliants to strip the jungle of leaves, poison gases against the civilians, Napalm fire bombs to burn up villages, and such other inhuman measures against the civilians could not have been calculated to make the Americans popular among the Vietnamese peasants.17 The victims were mostly children, and half-burnt, defaced children were a common sight. A report presented to the US Congress indicated that some military


actions had resulted in six civilian casualties for every guerrilla killed. The NLF reported that "by 1965 170,000 civilians had been killed in South Vietnam and nearly 60,000 had been wounded or disabled by torture". The victims were not restricted among supporters of the NLF but were found among a large number of South Vietnamese people who used to condemn the NLF. The NLF's humane treatment of and concern for all the wounded won them further adherents. Diem's shortsighted policies also won for the NLF adherents from a relatively non-politicized quarter that of the Buddhist monks.

Diem favoured his men and incorporated Catholic elements into an official state ideology, which antagonized even non-politicized Buddhist religionists. In a move clearly calculated to browbeat the Buddhists the government imposed restrictions on their celebrations of the Buddha's birth anniversary. When militant Buddhists demonstrated against these restrictions government troops


on 8 May 1963 opened fire on protestors in Hue, killing nine persons; several more were crushed under an armoured car. The government blamed the deaths and injuries on a grenade supposedly thrown into the crowd by an agent of Vietcong, but it carried no conviction.21 When the government persisted in its refusal to bend before the Buddhists' demand that the government accept its guilt and pay compensation to the Victims' families, they began to agitate against the regime. The climax of this agitation came in the dramatic and harrowing self-immolation of the monk Thick Quang on 11 June 1963. Even more horrifying was the unbounded callousness of the government.22 Madame Nhu described the incident as a "barbecue"; and Diem commented that "if the Buddhists wished to stage another one he would be glad to supply the gasoline".23

The NLF mobilized villages into a network of civilian organizations in a variety of ways. Villagers' participation ranged from full-time membership in the civilian infrastructure to low levels of activity in the struggle. The process of NLF mobilization implied both an "uprooting or breaking away from old settings, habits, and commitments"

21Maclear, ibid., pp.68-71.

22Hanh, n.20, pp.45-47 and Halberstam, n.8, pp.202 and 211.

and the introduction of "new patterns of groups of membership, organization, and commitment".24

The foundation of Vietnamese society lay in its villages and hamlets, where three-fourths of the population of Southern Vietnam lived. Most of the membership of the Front was drawn from village society. Traditional village culture was highly integrated and homogeneous. Each village constituted its own little community, and even in the face of forces disrupting village society, "The essential characteristics of the village way of life persisted" to the extent that "traditional values, practices, and rituals continued to be honoured and observed, and they were being transmitted to the younger generation as they were in the past".25

The ultimate goal of the NLF was to achieve the ideals of Marxism-Leninism and establish socialism in the entire country. A new forum had to be created for this with a socialist background and nationalist orientation to work out ways to defeat the enemy forces. The peasant was an important vehicle towards its success. To make mobilization attractive to the villagers the Front restructured the life


situation confronting them, and in addition, offered incentives to peasants which, however, had to be in accord with the Vietnamese basic personality characteristics.\textsuperscript{26} To make its agenda attractive to its target group, the NLF carried out programmes of economic and social reforms. It organized educational and literacy campaigns and helped the women to emerge as a strong force while at the same time establishing underground camps and large training programmes. The peasants under the NLF became masters of their land. The NLF was fulfilling their aspirations and they in turn helped the NLF win great influence over all strata of people. Aware that it could not successfully attract significant popular support with appeals to Marxism alone, the Front in course of time made itself more broad-based. Along with the jargon of Communism new idioms were added in its manifestoes such as independence from imperialists, democracy, and land reform. Slogans were coined condemning terror, asking for correct implementation of the Geneva accords, asking for peace, national independence, and democratic freedoms.\textsuperscript{27}


\textsuperscript{27}It is fairly clear that most Vietnamese wanted to avoid being dominated by outside forces. Saw in the United States, a threat to their independence. Hence the Front succeeded in fusing Communism and nationalism in the cause of national unity. Pike speaks of "profound resentment against foreign control", whereas Fall speaks of the Contd.,...
To suit the internal situation of the country, the Front as a Marxist-Leninist party, subscribed to the two-stage theory of revolution: a national democratic phase followed by a phase of socialist revolution. A Front, a broad union of various social classes, was needed to achieve the aims of the revolution, suited to "the objective circumstances" of each historical period.28

The NLF ideology fostered legitimacy with its themes of nationalism, heroism, and righteousness, which activated latent sentiments commonly held in a culture. Other ideological themes fortified the perception that the Front had the strength and the destiny to succeed for a broadly based political mobilization. Thus the Front offered the logical means of absorbing the vast number of new peasant and political activists into a political framework, under the umbrella of a projected alliance

"deep love" of the Vietnamese people for their "war-torn homeland". Buttinger stresses the struggle of the Vietnamese for independence over a thousand years. But the greatest single political force was not only Communism but nationalism itself where it was used and identified with national aspirations. Above all was the long victorious struggle against the French. See Douglas Pike, "How Strong Is the NLF?" Reporter (New York), 24 February, 1966, pp.20-24, Fall, n.15, pp.VII-VIII, and also Joseph Buttinger, The Smaller Dragon (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1958), pp.4-5.

among different classes. The Front sought to appeal to every group in the South with the promise of special attention, autonomy for minority tribal groups, land and freedom for the peasants, education for the youth, and freedom for the intellectuals.

Nationalism became the Front's rallying call. Hans Kohn has defined nationalism as "a belief on the part of a large group of people that they constitute a community, called a nation, that is entitled to independent statehood and the willingness of that people to grant their nation a primary and the primary terminal loyalty". Hayes says that "Nationalism is a modern emotional fusion and exaggeration of two very old phenomena - nationality and patriotism". The broad dimensions available to the Front for mobilizing the forces of nationalism were territory and the size of the nation. There was, besides, the sense of


31For details see, Hans Kohn, Nationalism, Its Meaning and History (Princeton: Von Nostrand, 1965); revd edn and Rupert Emerson, From Empire to Nation (Boston: The Beacon Press1967); p.104. Emerson states that Vietnam fulfils the classic criteria for nationalism.

common and unique history, shared values, culture, language, religion, race and awareness of nationality.33

The Front successfully appealed to the people’s feelings of nationalism which the Government of South Vietnam had failed to do. The latter did not offer needed social reforms nor understood the people’s aspirations. Through literature and propaganda even at Buddhist and Church religious places, working with the masses, the Front began to instigate the people against the puppet regime of the United States in Saigon, and assured the masses that they would win the war against the imperialists. While highlighting American atrocities and American bombing, they promised the people a better government that stood for socialism.

Political and psychological propaganda had been a major weapon of the Vietminh in the First Indo-China War (1930-45) in successfully ousting the French forces. The NLF, having learnt that historical lesson, targeted much of its propaganda at creating favourable public opinion in the United States and the non-Communist world, more so after

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the United States involvement in the conflict grew.\textsuperscript{34} The New York Times noted as early as 1965 that "communist hopes for victory (in Vietnam)... now turn more on American withdrawal through exhaustion or in response to the pressure of public opinion rather than on conventional military success".\textsuperscript{35}

The Front devoted a good deal more time to organization and propaganda than to armed attacks.\textsuperscript{36} In its strategy, the armed forces were organized into three categories, namely a guerrilla militia, regional forces, and main forces. In some ways the most important force were the militia (village self-defence force), forming the foundation of a three-tiered pyramid. Not only were they extremely lethal in the tiny engagements that comprised most of the fighting but also vital to the creation of the forces above them.\textsuperscript{37} This was done through political mobilization by party and Front cadres who worked individually, in

\textsuperscript{34}See the NLF "Appeal" of 23 April 1961 in NLF, The voice of Justice (Hanoi: FLPH, 1963), pp.35-46.

\textsuperscript{35}New York Times, 20 October 1965.


teams, or through a network of family and friends to deepen sympathy for the revolution.\footnote{38}

NLF propaganda highlighted two themes: "We are here to drive the foreigners out" and "Distribute the land to those that till it". The mass appeal of these slogans together with grassroot organization of the movement, ensured that the NLF went from strength to strength. The period between the first and second Congresses (1962-64) was a period of great structural development when the NLF strove to perfect its apparatus and strengthen its leadership in all fields. Its Central Committee set up a network of specialized bodies including a Military Commission, an Economic and Financial Commission, a Health Commission, a Commission for Information, Culture and Education and a Commission for Foreign Relations. The Front committees at lower level set up specialized sections for administration. A de-facto people's administration was established in the liberated zones, which accounted for three-fourths of the territory.\footnote{39} It carried out land reforms, stepped up farm


production, built up the network of health and educational services, organized cultural activities and mobilized the people for resistance.

The territory held by the NLF extended, by 1965, to four-fifths of the country, accounting for more than 10 million inhabitants. The general offensives and simultaneous uprisings launched from Tet in 1968, while shattering the US "pacification plan", further enlarged it. With local elections organized by the Front in the second half of 1968, "Revolutionary People's Committees" were set up in villages, districts and provinces and in many newly liberated cities. Thus, Washington and its puppet Saigon Government had to deal with the NLF not as a simple guerrilla force but as a vast popular movement with deep-rooted political, military and administrative structure.

From its general line, the NLF developed a politico-military strategy of all-round people's war aimed at mobilizing all factions for the revolution. The enemy possessed a vast military, economic and technical

potential. He could not be met on his own terms. Armed struggle had therefore to be closely combined with political struggle, with emphasis on political struggle. Armed struggle, in fact proceeded from the political struggle. The attack was to be three-pronged: political action of the masses, military action and agitation among enemy troops. The enemy had to be faced simultaneously in the three strategic sectors, i.e. rural areas, mountain areas and urban centres.41

Success was first achieved at the grassroots, in the countryside. City life hardly made any impact on these remote villages, and the regime in Saigon could hardly exercise meaningful control over them. Their memory of the "first resistance" and the people's democratic power was almost indestructible.42

Having liberated vast rural areas by means of successive insurrections, the peasants, the main force of the revolution, established self-management bodies and built up armed and political forces. Under the leadership of the NLF, they distributed land, stepped up farm production, recognized social life; and launched the


struggle against illiteracy and diseases. In the liberated areas, the anti-US resistance and political struggle consisted in mobilizing all human and material resources for the war and at the same time laying the base for the people's democratic regime.\textsuperscript{43}

In the face of US armed aggression, in both its "special war" and "local war" stages, the NLF conducted an all-round people's revolutionary war bringing into play both political and armed forces. Le Duan wrote:

> the close combination of political and military struggle constitutes the basic form of revolutionary violence in South Vietnam, the most suitable one to resist neo-colonialism. It has been used not only in the course of insurrection, but also in dealing with the American imperialists 'special war' and limited war.\textsuperscript{44}

A people's war must necessarily be capable of mobilizing the broadest sections of the people together with their resources. This it cannot do unless it is basically a political war. General Vo Nguyen Giap wrote:

> To prepare the armed insurrection well, the primary and most important work was conducting propaganda among the masses, organizing them, broadening and strengthening the patriotic organizations. Only by proceeding from solid political organizations was it possible to build up solid para-military organizations and to

\textsuperscript{43}Max Clos, "Strategist Behind the Vietcong", \textit{New York Times Magazine}, sec.6, part 1, 16 August 1964, pp. 52-53.

\textsuperscript{44}Le Duan, \textit{Forward under the Glorious Banner of the October Revolution} (Hanoi: FLPH, 1967), p.45.
advance towards the creation of small guerrilla groups closely linked with the revolutionary masses and thereby capable of operating and developing”.45

According to General Giap, political struggle within the framework of the liberation war in South Vietnam "played a very fundamental role, because it was in the political field that lay our fundamental superiority and the enemy's fundamental weakness."46. Involving ever larger and ever better organized forces of the people, the Front took on the most varied aspects, ranging from harassing the enemy's administrative apparatus by daily demands to political violence: meetings and mass demonstrations, strikes in factories, schools and markets, and demonstrations with occupation of urban centres by peasant masses. With the help of armed struggle it all culminated in partial uprisings and local insurrections wherever condition were ripe.47

NLF strategy was largely based on open actions, such as exploiting all legal possibilities, defending the people's rights, undermining the puppet regime's authority, and educating the masses politically. Multiform


underground activities continued at the same time to erode the enemy's rear, immobilize large numbers of enemy forces and prepare subjective conditions for subsequent uprisings or armed actions.48

A unique trait of the political struggle, and typical of the extremely keen political sense of the South Vietnamese revolutionaries, was the systematic mobilization of the masses to political violence, waged under the pretext of demanding protection from the puppet administration and troops against their own enemies. Commencing in 1958-59, this form of struggle quickly spread over the whole country, turning against the Saigon regime's own slogans of "National independence and democracy".49 Thousands of peasants used to besiege administrative offices, military and police posts, denouncing the atrocities, demanding damages and an end to those crimes. While greatly embarrassing the authorities, these episodes at the same time won for the demonstrators the sympathy of rank-and-file civil servants, servicemen and policemen.50 Supported by the city folks, the demonstrators


used to stay on for days, even a week or longer, occupying markets, schools, and other public places. If policemen opened fire on the demonstrators, the crowd, rather than break up, marched on carrying their dead in the front ranks.51

Such actions required an iron morale, excellent organization and a leadership capable of prompt and clever reaction to enemy counter-attacks. Not only had the masses engaged in the fight to be organized but also the people who kept them supplied, helped their families in their absence and reserve forces if reinforcements were needed. Every village had on full alert, a force for political struggle. Alongside the three kinds of armed forces, this “mass political army” operated under unified command at district and even provincial level. It was nicknamed “the long-haired army” because of the prominent role women played in it. When they went to the fight, holding their infants in their arms, it could not but demoralize the RVN troops and police.52

Within the general framework of political struggle, another main prong of attack was conducting patient and


intensive work of explanation and persuasion among RVN troops. The immediate aim was to undermine their morale, neutralize them, cause them to disband or even gradually win them over to the cause of the revolution by inciting them to sabotage, desertion, mutiny or mass defection to the resistance; the ultimate aim being to deprive US neo-colonialism of its main tool.53

As it was, the RVN army was riven by division and conflicts of both a national and class character. Class opposition existed between voluntary soldiers and the peasants who had been forcibly drafted. The regime's high officials and subordinate officers, soldiers and officers, and US "advisers" differed in their stand and often handled the dissent with contempt and in a brute manner.54

Leaving aside a handful, the men in the Saigon army, most of whom had multiple personal or family relationships within the NLF, were considered by the Front as "retrievable". They were treated as a "strayed class or blood brothers" and every effort was made to retrieve them through psychological and practical measures.55 The voice of a wife, a mother or simply an old man proved highly

53 ibid.


effective in attracting sizable numbers of enemy troops to the side of the NLF. The Front distributed land to SRV servicemen, awaiting their return to the native village. This, combined with a policy of clemency, enabled deserters and prisoners to be integrated into the community life. Subsequently, they turned into the best motivated fighters against the Saigon regime.56

Revolution, in the view of the NLF, was not primarily a matter of killing or the clash of armies. Much more, the substance of a revolution was to be measured by how profound an impact it was making on people's lives. Within the NLF framework, bonds of authority, self-interest, and belief in a new order were being developed that foreshadowed the emergence of a modern nation. Vietnamese village society was complex, subtle and fascinating. The Vietminh sought to transform the traditional Vietnamese way of life into a new political, economic, and social order while giving the impression that war was a prelude to revolution. In the renewed war, the aim of battle was clearly the nature of Vietnamese society. The war itself followed a different course: rather than striving for a dramatic, spontaneous collapse of the old regime, the Front followed a strategy of gaining control. The roots

Vo Nguyen She Tan Dan, "In the Liberated Zones of South Vietnam", in Vietnamese Studies (n.p.), no.8, 1966, pp.159-65.
of the war lay muted and deep in the social changes and political forces that had sprouted even before the resistance movement which ended the French rule.\textsuperscript{57}

The traditional political order of Vietnamese society coexisted at two levels, i.e. village and the bureaucracy. Traditionally the village was self-contained, highly integrated culturally, socially, economically, highly independent from other villages, and largely self-governing. The traditional Vietnamese dynastic state with its mandarin bureaucracy served as a political superstructure connecting and coordinating the otherwise autonomous villages for such purposes as public works, religious functions, and military functions. The village, rather than particular individuals, had collective obligations to the state. In collecting taxes, raising corvees, or gathering soldiers, the state dealt with a council of nobles representing the village as a whole. This was, as McAlister and Mus observe, a skilful division of labour. The state - from the military, judicial, and religious point of view - was centralized and authoritarian. No village could have defied it with impunity. But because of the distribution of administrative duties between it and the villages, especially in economic matters, the state weighed lightly.\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{57}Berman, n.2, p.2.

Peasants, firmly rooted in their village life, were loosely linked by means of an administrative structure to a weak but centralized political system that could sporadically and in limited ways mobilize their energies. The institutional bonds holding this system together stemmed from two closely related sources: common interests and a common belief, in a Confucian tradition that prescribed and held such an order to be legitimate.\textsuperscript{59}

In the earlier war, a major ideological appeal of the Vietminh was national salvation from foreign imperialists. The Vietminh’s strategy of revolution, adopted from the Chinese, was based upon the building of a revolutionary organization. Rather than being a small, exclusivist party, they mobilized the masses of peasants for resistance. The peasants became members in a revolutionary organization composed of the party, the military, and a network of civilian associations within villages, where peasants, soldiers, party members and leaders were integrated into a centralized political structure to command and control.\textsuperscript{60}

Since their opponent forces controlled the urban centres, the Communists concentrated on gaining control over villages and local areas where the true power in this decentralized order had always existed. Step by step, they

\textsuperscript{59}ibid., pp.56-59.

\textsuperscript{60}McAlister, n.2, p.140.
consolidated their influence over more and more local areas. At each step, the network of organizations provided new opportunities for peasants to participate in a changed social order. A new pattern of authority was instituted that linked village and villager into the centralized political order. In fact, the Communist revolutionary strategy was a strategy of organization building, one that employed the revolutionary organization as both a means and an end - in the words of Samuel Huntington, "mating the mobilization of new groups into politics to the creation and institutionalization of new political organization".\(^6\)

Initially the areas fully under Vietminh control were limited to the narrow central portion of Vietnam and to such regions of the Mekong Delta as the Ca Mau peninsula and the territory surrounding the Plain Reeds. The Geneva Accords of 1954 which ended the war - at least temporarily - recognized a division of the country, yet the revolution had not been completed. After the accords were signed there was resettlement of population across the demilitarized zone. Although the Republic of Vietnam, with US aid, maintained a substantial military force, it controlled only the urban areas.\(^6\) Its attempts to establish


\(^6\)Fitzgerald, n.2, p.92.
itself in the countryside did not evoke any popular support. Saigon's intervention into village life was often either ineffective or further exacerbated the erosion of the traditional village cohesion that had been in decline throughout the twentieth century. The Front decided to resume the old task of the Vietminh to defeat the opponent who had military might but not legitimacy in the countryside.

In keeping with the changed situation the appeals and tactics of the NLF differed from that of the Vietminh. The South was highly fractionalized, its economic and social conditions were distinct from those of the North and the opponents no longer represented a colonial regime. Nevertheless, the Front's basic revolutionary strategy was similar to that of the Vietminh. Building upon that foundation the NLF began mobilizing peasants by engaging them in a network of civilian and military organizations. As before, the civilian organizations consisted of a

63 During the period between 1955-1958, the Diem government waged a campaign of repression against former members of the resistance. This campaign succeeded in destroying much of the Vietminh organization within the villages. Many ex-resistance fighters in the South were recruited and organized by Communist Cadres. By 1958, a network of organizations emerged. Following the February 1962 Congress of the Front, the formation of the Southern Communist was People's Revolutionary Party, and the battle of Ap Bac, the structure of the organization established...See Joseph J. Zasloff, Origin of the Insurgency in South Vietnam, 1954-60: The Role of Southern Vietminh Cadres (Santa Monica, California: Rand Corporation, 1968), pp.68-69.
variety of socio-economic associations at the village level and of an administrative-political hierarchy that both operated within the village and linked the village leadership to a highly centralized authority. In some liberated areas, the Front became the de facto government and again "employed a piecemeal, locally-oriented organizational process to mobilize a sizable portion of the peasantry". This mobilization, viewed in strictly military terms, was simply a means for conscripting an army and providing a logistic and intelligence base. McAlister says, "Such mobilization effects a revolution even as it lays the basis for more sustained military efforts". Peasants recruited into the revolutionary organization became more than soldiers in a fighting force; they became members of a potential institution founding the basis for a nation-state.

In the process of institutionalization the NLF undertook three tasks initially. First, peasants were mobilized to become members; secondly, they were integrated into the new organization to comply with its demands;

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65 *ibid*.

thirdly, the organization maintained itself against the disintegrative stresses of sustained warfare. A striking organizational characteristic of the Front was the type of compliance it sought and the techniques used to achieve compliance. To be successful and complete, a revolution must become institutionalized, establish regularized pattern of behaviour including most particularly new patterns of authority. In the Front strategy, the revolutionary organization was a vehicle for institutionalization as institutional bonds develop into a nascent political order.\(^6^7\)

Recruitment is a basic task in building an army, an organization, or a new order. Recruitment of peasants into the Front was neither the spontaneous volunteering alone nor the conscription of villagers into enforced slavery: it involved a mixture of coercion and persuasion that sought to overcome the peasant's traditional patterns of behaviour and convince him to accept a new authority. By inducting peasants on a large scale, the Front created a capability for accomplishing social goals. Within the limits of the war environment and opposing forces, the Front mobilized many peasants by controlling village life, raising anti-government consciousness and provoking hatred.\(^6^8\)

\(^6^7\)Berman, n.2, p.29.

The Front recruited its troops in a number of ways ranging from kidnapping to enlistment drives, from drafting eligible men from entire villages to carefully planned and protracted propagandazing of single individuals. From overt patriotic and nationalistic appeals, the techniques were so varied from area to area, individual to individual, one phase of the war to another, and even from one reason to another that before illustrating specific techniques for particular individuals, several observations about broad patterns in Front recruitment are in order. 69

Political and military developments in the course of war, the American involvement, RVN drafting and military efforts, the Strategic Hamlets programme, pacification programme, etc. caused major strategic shifts in NLF recruitment policies. In the lonely years of forming and solidifying, from 1957 to 1962 - the years called by Pike "the social movement propaganda phase" - considerable emphasis was placed on persuasion and voluntary enlistment of carefully selected recruits and the "political struggle movement phase" from early 1962 to late 1963 resulted in a change of strategy leading to less selective recruitment.70


From 1964 to 1967, the level of conflict and need for new recruits greatly increased and the revolutionary organization within the Front became mass based.

The NLF's major recruitment came from the ranks of RVN deserters who were goaded into this action by their resentment against the inhuman treatment within the RVN army and perpetual fear of NLF reprisals. An intransigent RVN soldier faced the prospect of being abducted or shot or someone in the immediate family being shot by the NLF volunteers. The NLF also went to great lengths to convince the public that it was the winning side, to encourage RVN soldiers to desert to its ranks. A deserter brought with him his gun and useful information.71

In recruitment, the emphasis was on "catching them young". As Pike puts it:

Recruiting youth was a deliberate policy of the Front and for recruitment, the NLF was interested only in the young, of recruiting the 16 to 20 age group first, the 21 to 25 age group second, and little interest was shown in those over 25 unless they demonstrated some special talents.72

Youth has premium because the young people's identity formation is incomplete. Erik Erikson observes that

71 See Hong Quang, "What Forced the US to De-escalate the War?", *Vietnam Courier Monthly*, no. 4, 1988, pp. 4-5. Even with 1.2 million troops (US ground force, Saigon troops and Satellite troops) the South Vietnamese government suffered heavy military and political setbacks in 1968, which compelled the United States to de-escalate the war.

72 Pike, n.70, p.287.
late adolescence is the most favourable period, and late adolescent personalities of any age group, the best subjects for indoctrination, because in adolescence an ideological realignment is by necessity in process and a number of ideological possibilities are waiting to be hierarchically ordered by opportunity, leadership, and friendship.  

The strategic shifts in policy as well as the numerous changes in content and emphasis of recruitment were centrally planned and controlled by the Front's organizational apparatus. Considerable tactical flexibility was, however, exercised at local levels on the who, how, and when of recruitment. Careful planning involved maintaining detailed dossiers on individuals at the village level. Front members were particularly alert to personal difficulties that increased the susceptibility of potential recruits. As W.P. Davison observes:

If a man was experiencing family problems, had gone badly into debt, was in trouble with law, was about to be drafted into the army, or had been mistreated by government officials, this was likely to come to the attention of watchful Vietcong agents, who would approach him to join their movement.

In addition, peasants were recruited to serve different civilian functions in the NLF. The result of this localized

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74Pike, n.70, p.291.

approach was that "the revolutionary organization ensured that critical decisions ... were made by local people, with relatively more flexibility and with some sensitivity to demands of the particular situation".\textsuperscript{76} Since the cadres identified with organizationally prescribed behaviour\textsuperscript{77} and had internalized elements of a revolutionary ideology they had a set of commonly accepted beliefs about how to treat villagers and persuade them to join the Front.\textsuperscript{78}

The major factor in recruitment were the circumstances of the village life. Even before the war began, the social, political and economic institutions in the countryside had been eroding, in the wake of the Vietminh war.\textsuperscript{79} By the time the NLF began mobilization, the de facto government operated by powerful landlords in large areas of the Mekong Delta or by the religious sects had almost disappeared, \textsuperscript{80} and this

\textsuperscript{76}Race, n.2, p.164.


\textsuperscript{78}The literature on organizations seldom deals with the control of low level members who have considerable operational autonomy and whose activities cannot be easily monitored. The importance of commonly held norms and values for obtaining behaviour in accord with the general interests of the organization in this decentralized situation is dealt with in H. Kaufman, \textit{The Forest Ranger} (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1960).

\textsuperscript{79}Race, n.2, p.140.

\textsuperscript{80}Fitzgerald, n.2, p.157.
facilitated the Front's access to the village and to the individual. The Front also actively strove to disrupt and destroy village organization and replace it with its own. 81 In controlling village life and in refurnishing village social organization, the success of the Front varied from place to place, as could be seen by its own description of various regions as "extended liberated zone", "temporarily liberated zone" and "weak zone". 82 In liberated zones the Front became the virtual government. A social political communist infrastructure existed, taxes were collected, no RVN functionaries were present, communication and mobility to other areas were controlled. Peasant mobilization could go on in these areas unhindered.

The liberated areas were better places for the Front to reorganize, train and rest, besides being launching grounds for campaigns against the enemy's refugees. They not only satisfied all the material requirements of the Front but also were a source of revolutionary enthusiasm for their armed forces and population, the latter being ever willing to make every sacrifice for the Front. Though their economic potential was still limited, they became a great source of

81Race, n.2; and See also R.H. Betts, Vietcong Village Control: Some Observations on the Origin and Dynamics of Modern Revolutionary Warfare (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Centre for International Studies, August 1964).

82Fall, n.15, p.369.
mobilization of strength.  

In the contested areas, NLF presence could be real if not constant. A political infrastructure did exist, even if at times covert. Taxes were collected, and recruitment activities went on, though RVN functionaries might be present or enter the hamlet during the daytime, with armed might. Even in "government controlled areas", or the "weak zone" as the Front termed it, NLF presence existed in the form of a covert infrastructure or sporadic propaganda visits.

Though in many areas, the administrative apparatus installed by Saigon, and financed by the Americans, functioned down to the village level, and military posts were maintained, leading to claims in Washington that the area was under control of Saigon, in actuality this administrative and military presence was purely fictitious. Zealous US agents had been either liquidated or driven away by the people. Whatever administrative apparatus remained could not collect taxes, recruit soldiers or give orders. Civil servants and army men did not venture out of their shelter and pretended to be ignorant of what was happening around them. Officials and village notables, apparently serving the Saigon administration, worked in fact, for the NLF. Katsuichi Honda wrote:

We were told that there was an outpost of the Government's militia only 300 yards off from this place, where twelve militiamen lived with their families; and they paid taxes to the NLF. The government soldiers never tried to fire on them even if the NLF soldiers passed by. And in the absence of the NLF, they would shoot up into the sky — and so give the appearance, for the Americans’ benefit, of being a post of conscientious government troops. Indeed, they were indifferent, even when our cameramen Fujiki went inside the area surrounded by barbed wire on the following day to take some pictures. A young soldier simply looked at us with shy and smiling eyes, as if embarrassed at being a government soldier.84

The basic message of the Front's propaganda, as summed up by McAlister, was that:

North Vietnamese people were trying to help their South Vietnamese brothers chase away the American imperialists and to win back their independence. They showed how rotten the Diem regime was. Diem and Lexuan (Ms Nhu) were dictatorial and were selling the South Vietnamese people to the Americans for their own family’s profit. The Americans were false friends. They did not come to Vietnam to help the people but rather to take over the country. Then they talked about the aims of the people’s Liberation Front which were to liberate South Vietnam from the domination of American imperialism and from the Nhu family, and to lead the South Vietnamese to Socialism as in North Vietnam, where no one was exploited and where everybody was free and everybody was the master of his tools and his land”.85


85McAlister and Mus, "Marxism and Traditionalism in Vietnam", Ch. 7, n.58, and Fitzgerald, n.2, pp.212-26. The latter work provides an insightful discussion of how sensitive by these Front propaganda themes employed refrains from the traditional culture.
The ideological content of the message, being simple and personalized, was appropriate for peasants. It worked on the peasants' nationalism and xenophobia. It attacked the misconduct of persons rather than institutions, the betrayal of trust and conveyed the symbolic expression for socialism, the image of a future "where no one was exploited". It was solidly grounded in the Vietnamese common belief system and served to legitimize the NLF.86

Propaganda was innovatively combined with entertainment, through agitprop teams. The team, consisting of soldiers sufficient to deter an RVN attack and a group of entertainers and cadres, operated mostly at night. Dances were held to entertain the people, the presence of prostitutes making the programme more enticing, and many decided to join on the spot. Recruitment meetings were also held at the village level.87

To win over the people's loyalty, the Front consciously strove for control over them through a variety of methods. One means was enmeshing the villager in a network of social movements and organization which developed social pressures to keep the dissenter in line - probably, the most powerful force in Vietnamese society. Another method was through intensive communication efforts: education, 

86 Fitzgerald, ibid., pp.218-22.
87 Pike, n.70, pp.126-8.
thought reform, agitation, propaganda. A third method was coercion, force and terror.\textsuperscript{88}

The Front consciously made its volunteers conversant with the principles of Marxism and Communism. The ideal medium of indoctrination were educational institutions. An initial period of intensive training and indoctrination was followed by regular and continuous training. The initial phase consisted of military and political training sessions, day-to-day routine, and special activities. The recruits were taught the history, the nature and the methodology of revolution from the NLF’s ideological perspective. The method of education was considered more important than the specific content of the sessions, which varied. Simple slogans - frequently from the writings of Mao Zedong and Vo Nguyen Giap - were learnt byrote. Free questioning by the students was another technique used.\textsuperscript{89}

In the early years, from 1959 to 1963, training was prolonged and emphasized political indoctrination. In later years, when the Front relied on draft and recruitment and when the pace of the war accelerated, initial training was more erratic and less political.

\textsuperscript{88}Pike, n.28, and see Chap II pp.23-29.

Basic training was followed by the imparting of Communist doctrines. The volunteers' training had to match their different assignments. Members of an agitprop team who had the job of educating and persuading villagers, for instance, needed greater grounding in ideological knowledge. Additional indoctrination occurred with career advancement, reinforcing previously learned values and as a significant symbol of status, since it was imparted only to individuals selected out of the rank and file. The importance of the information learnt also increased, particularly with admission into the party. A former cadre recalled:

From the spiritual point of view, we had to work all day. Any leisure time was spent in indoctrination sessions. The sessions usually began at 7 p.m. Saigon time; everybody exchanged views on the work done during the day, recalling the accomplishments as well as the defects in order to learn how to improve future work. The sessions lasted about an hour followed by collective amusement sessions, i.e., songs and music to make us think less about our families.°°

The general group discussion sessions were mostly held at the platoon level, and mutual and self-criticism sessions at the squad and cell level. These formed critical aspects of indoctrination. Criticism sessions on the other hand were highly individualized, each soldier being expected to examine his own behaviour and that of his comrades. Active

participation was compulsory.\textsuperscript{91}

Homogenization of information disseminated was also considered necessary, although absolute homogenization was not achieved in practice. The correct party line was formulated by agencies of the central committee and disseminated to the cadre, usually political officers, by means of directives, broadcasts from Radio Hanoi and Radio Liberation, newspapers, pamphlets, and special meetings. Soldiers were fed this line by cadres in group sessions, usually at the squad or cell level. The rank and file soldiers also had limited access to authorized newspapers, leaflets, and booklets, and occasionally to radio broadcasts - all tailored for internal propaganda. The soldiers received news only of victories and never of defeats, of enemy losses that were greatly exaggerated while the Front losses were minimized, and laudatory reports of the heroic deeds of the common soldier and of combat units.\textsuperscript{92} Cultural activities, group singing and entertainment in the form of plays, story telling, dances, and songs were also designed for indoctrination.\textsuperscript{93}

Jacques Doyon wrote of the Vietnamese revolution:

\textsuperscript{91}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{92}Pike, n.70, p.411.

\textsuperscript{93}Ibid.
the Vietnam war is indeed a rural war. Like the NLF leaders, some American advisers think that victory will belong to those holding control over the two thousand five hundred South Vietnamese villages, which in turn are divided into twelve thousand hamlets; twelve million peasants out of a total of fifteen million South Vietnamese. The war cannot be won without the effective or tacit backing of these villagers...

The Vietnamese revolution was, in the main, a revolution to liberate the peasantry, who constituted 95 percent of the population. The liberated zones were essentially rural, and land reform began to be implemented there in earnest. Land is, after all, the most cherished aspiration of the peasant, to own what he tills. During the war against the French, they had achieved some semblance of land reform, but after 1954, under Diem's rule, landlords and village officials again grabbed these lands. The NLF put forward many measures to defend the interests of the peasants such as reduction of land rent, guarantee of status quo, guarantee of the right of ownership and protection of the peasants' ownership of the lands allotted to them.

The NLF suppressed the "agrovilles" and agricultural settlements created by Diem, confiscated the imperialists' and their agents' property, and conducted fair and rational redistribution of communal lands. Through negotiation, the Front redeemed lands from owners who had excess land. The

landlords were classified into progressive and evil, and the evil were punished. Middle peasants as well as the poor and landless received land, the amount of land received averaging about one half hectare per family.\textsuperscript{95}

By 1965, a total of 1,570,200 hectares of land had been redistributed. Virtually every peasant now had some land, and most were now classified as middle peasants.

The Front was careful to present an image of local initiative and voluntary participation. The first stage used the Chinese "three together system",\textsuperscript{96} in which trained cadres lived with poor peasants and encouraged them to carry out the programme with the support of the movement. Later, the Front cancelled all debts owed by the peasants to Diem's agricultural "Loan Department".\textsuperscript{97}

Apart from land reforms, the NLF also introduced large-scale social reforms. More than 1,500 schools were opened, village medical services were started, a national medical service was started, and a national education system was established.

\textsuperscript{95}Race, n.2, pp.125-8.

\textsuperscript{96}The Chinese Three Together System: under this system, groups of cadres were trained secretly in China, who used to come to the village as peasants. Through the party cell they made acquaintance of a few people, and asked for permission to live in their houses. They then put into practice the Three Together System (in Chinese San Tong), which means that they worked together with their hosts (taking no payment), ate meals with them (whilst paying their own share) and slept with them in the same bed. When the host was married, as was usually the case, a girl cadre shared the bed with the peasant's wife. Hoang Van Chi, \textit{From Colonialism to Communism} (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1964), p.140.

campaign against illiteracy was launched and several newspapers and periodicals were published in various areas under NLF control.

It was in the very nature of the Vietnamese revolutionary movement to introduce basic social and political reforms. The Front established an administrative apparatus that could begin to meet the aspirations of the people. At the outset, in the free zone and contested areas, NLF committees and people's self-managing committees were set up. The people's self-management committee took charge of public affairs and resistance work to attain security and order, self-defence, economy and finance, propaganda and education, health and social services. The most important tasks were allotment of land, settlement of conflicts, organization and mobilization of population, and material and financial resources for the resistance. In fact, the NLF committee was overall responsible for the general leadership of the resistance. In the new situation, as during the war against the French, the rural areas were considered the key to victory, since they were relatively independent of Saigon's rule.

For the purposes of the present conflict, the rural areas were divided into two separate strategic areas, the
mountains and lowland plains. The mountains consisted primarily of the Central Highlands, which formed the backbone of the country from an area fifty miles north of Saigon up to the Demilitarization zone.\textsuperscript{98}

In the Central Highlands, inhabited by the national minorities, national autonomy committees were set up, whose tasks, functions and duties were similar to those of the people’s self-managing committees. Thus, people’s power was established on populated territory by the Front. In 1968, when the balance of forces definitely tipped in favour of the revolution, the NLF Central Committee adopted the slogan, “Crush the enemy’s administration and win power for the people”.

The Front paid particular attention to agricultural production in the liberated areas. It launched a movement for production, chiefly in the highlands where conditions were favourable for cultivation. Measures were taken to assist and encourage the farmers, and canals and ditches were dug to complete the irrigation network.\textsuperscript{99} Ho Chi Minh

\textsuperscript{98}Considering the importance of mountain terrains, an ideal liberated base area had been established, when the Viet Bac became the first major liberated zone for the Vietminh during the war against the French. In South Vietnam, the Central Highlands were called upon to play the same role in the struggle against the Diem regime and the Americans. Pike n.70, pp.124-5, 132 and 224-5, and Allan E. Goodman, \textit{The Lost Peace} (Stanford: Hoover, 1978), pp.13-15.

\textsuperscript{99}Fall, n.15, pp.290-5.
had said: "We must strive to advance rapidly, vigorously and steadily in the development of agriculture, because one must have enough to eat before one could practise the good doctrine, says the proverb, so we must gradually better the people's livelihood". And "if we do well in agriculture and industry, we shall do well in building socialism, which provides a solid and strong foundation for the struggle for the peaceful reunification of the country. Thus, peasants could become owners of their land under the NLF. Reforms sought sufficiency, self-reliance and established deeply binding relations to the struggle of the guerrillas, whose number rose from 34,000 in 1962 to 51,000 in 1964.

100 Ho Chi Minh, n.3, p.266.