
Peasants and Revolutionary Movements: The Viet Cong as a Case Study

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Abstract

During the Vietnam War the US government in conjunction with the government of South Vietnam instituted a plan encouraging desertion from the Viet Cong and the 'return to the embrace of the Vietnamese Nation'. A successful implementation of this plan, the Chieu Hoi ('Open Arms') Program, depended on an analysis of the motivations for enlistment in the Viet Cong. The voluminous research on the Viet Cong during the war concentrates on its structure and activities rather than on the patterns of enlistment in and desertion from it. An examination of the factors that led to enlistment in or desertion from the Viet Cong may provide better indications concerning the extent of the United States' perception of the nature and character of the war. The purpose of this article is to examine peasant motivations for enlistment in the Viet Cong. The study begins with a discussion of theories regarding peasant motivation for joining revolutionary movements. It continues with an analysis of Vietnamese society which provides the necessary basis for understanding peasant motivation for joining the Viet Cong. Finally, the article discusses the reasons for peasant desertion from the organization and comes to the conclusion that motivation for enlistment was not ideological (i.e. Communist) in nature.

Keywords

Chieu Hoi Program, counterinsurgency, psychological warfare, revolutionary movements, Viet Cong, Vietnam War

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The sources utilized here include sociological and anthropological studies of Vietnamese society conducted during the war. Although often commissioned by the American army, these studies do not reflect prevailing operational concepts, but are comprehensive academic attempts to understand and represent Vietnamese society.¹

An exploration of Vietnamese peasant motivations for enlisting in the Viet Cong is crucial to the understanding of the organization since it drew its strength from this population, provided it with shelter and food, and recruited its personnel from it. It is historical fact that the Viet Cong received much of its supply via the Ho Chi Minh Trail, but the manpower of the organization came from the local population of South Vietnam. According to Maoist doctrine, revolutionary wars require the active assistance of a small percentage of the population and the passive support of most of it, especially its agrarian component. In the Vietnamese case agrarian support was even more important, given that the Viet Cong was a self-proclaimed agrarian movement. However, being a political, ideological, and secular revolutionary movement, the Viet Cong had to adapt its methods for the benefit of the peasants.² The need to do so grew from the understanding that the guerrilla fighter is totally dependent on the agrarian environment in which he endeavours to wage war and must therefore earn the favour of the peasantry. 'Peasants are to the Guerilla', Mao stated, 'as water is to fish'.³ This orientation sometimes gives the impression of a conflict between rural and urban societies. But control over rural areas is the first phase in achieving control over the whole country.

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- 1 *Improving Effectiveness of the Chieu Hoi Program: Revised Final Report*, vol. 2, *The Viet Cong: Organizational, Politics and Psychological Strengths and Weaknesses* (Cambridge, MA, 1967), appendix A, U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD, Records of the United States Forces in South East Asia, 1950–1975 (RG 472), CORDS INFO. LIB. files, box 3, file no. 101026; R.C. Kriegel, *Vietnamese Attitudes and Behavior Related to Management Problems of the Revolutionary Development Program* (Washington, DC, 1969). The most important book about the Viet Cong is D. Pike, *Viet Cong: The Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam*, (Cambridge, MA, 1966). See also G.C. Hickey, *Village in Vietnam* (New Haven, 1964).
 - 2 *Improving Effectiveness of the Chieu Hoi Program*, vol. 2, p. 81.
 - 3 Mao Tse-tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, tr. S.B. Griffith (New York, 2005), p. 93. See also R. Desai and H. Eckstein, 'Insurgency: The Transformation of Peasant Rebellion', *World Politics* XLII (1990), pp. 442–43.

I. Peasants and Revolutionary Movements: A Short Theoretical and Historical Analysis

Researchers differ regarding the factors that have led agrarian societies to revolt against central governments and join revolutionary movements, but agree that the ultimate peasant goal has been an improvement in the economic, political, and social standard of living. Yet such studies have resorted to western concepts, such as capitalism, socialism or Communism, when investigating behavioural patterns of developing agrarian societies. This methodological difficulty becomes clearer through studies showing that the peasants did not share a coherent ideology but rather adopted one ideology or another according to circumstances.

One school of thought examining the factors leading to peasant revolts argues that political unrest in rural society evolves from the destruction of traditional society by capitalism arriving in conjunction with colonialism (moral economy). Another school holds that these revolts stem from the destruction of traditional political classes and pre-capitalistic patron–client relations (political economy). Both schools assume that the social pressure stems from the dramatic changes imposed on traditional societies. Rural society in general, and that of South-East Asia in particular, is characterized by a system of rights and obligations regulating relations between individuals and between them and society. Once the delicate balance enabling this system is upset, society is forced to search for an alternative system, or in other words – to revolt.⁴

The combination of both models may be illustrated through the 1930 Vietnamese revolt. The integration of the Vietnamese economy into the world economy through the French colonial system linked their fates. The economic crisis of the 1930s, which caused world markets to fall, led to a dramatic drop in the price of rice in Vietnam and resulted in a widespread rural revolt (1930–31). White argues that the Vietnamese peasantry attempted to combat the modernization process imposed by France. However, the fight required aid from external forces, nationalist as well as Communist,⁵ mainly the national movement fighting to free Vietnam from French imperialism. A direct link was thereby established between urban Communism and rural circles; but the part played by the Communist Party in this revolt remains unclear, since the revolt was traditional rather than national Communist in character, as was the case in China and in Russia.⁶

Protest in Vietnam was spontaneous and was instigated by food shortages. The Communist Party leadership in the 1930s was essentially orthodox in adopting Marxism-Leninism verbatim, believing that a Communist revolution relied on the urban proletariat. This understanding notwithstanding, a certain level of cooperation existed between the

4 S.E. Guggenheim and R.P. Weller, 'Introduction: Moral Economy, Capitalism, and State Power in Rural Protest', in S.E. Guggenheim and R.P. Weller, eds, *Power and Protest in the Countryside: Studies of Rural Unrest in Asia, Europe, and Latin America* (Durham, 1982), pp. 3–5.

5 C.P. White, 'The Peasant and the Party in the Vietnamese Revolution', in D.B. Miller, ed., *Peasant and Politics: Grass Roots Reaction to Change in Asia* (New York, 1979), p. 21.

6 T.L. Brown, *War and Aftermath in Vietnam* (London and New York, 1991), p. 22.

urban Communist leadership and the rural revolt.⁷ Although France easily suppressed the revolt, it was nonetheless important to the development of the struggle in Vietnam. It proved to the Communist leadership that the peasantry was more reliable than the urban proletariat. Moreover, it resulted in the transfer of the political, and later military, centre of gravity from the French-occupied cities to the rural areas. Political cadres, often local residents, began appearing in the villages preaching Communist teachings. Attempts to convey the philosophical-political essence of Communism were soon rejected in favour of simplified ideas and a continuous emphasis on tradition. Peasants were told that joining Communism meant fighting French colonialism, abolishing large estates, and promoting agrarian reform. In other words, the Communists promised political autonomy and ownership of land. They explained the basic tenets of Communism (*Xa hoi hoa*) through the central traditional concept *Xa*, denoting the connection between men and land. The verb *hoa* denotes heavenly authority over the land through man, and the word *hoi* means unification. Taken as a whole, the term denotes heavenly sanctified socialism as a unification of man and land.⁸

This revolt shows that the peasants had set out both to defend their traditional way of life and to improve their economic situation.

II. Rural Vietnamese Society: A Sociological Perspective

Three traditional circles influenced the life of the Vietnamese peasant:⁹ family, village, and religion. Of these, the familial circle held the greatest significance: it was this circle that ultimately influenced a decision to join or defect from the Viet Cong.

Vietnamese society is based on Confucian philosophy, at the root of which is the understanding that society is harmonic but at the same time hierarchic and unequal.¹⁰ The smallest unit in Confucian society is the family, which maintains a strict gender- and age-based hierarchy. Women are subordinate to men, and children must obey their elders. The nuclear family is the primal and often only socioeconomic and religious basis of Vietnamese society. Concepts such as nationalism and nationality are foreign to Vietnamese peasants, since their allegiance is first and foremost to the family.¹¹ The United States estimated that as many as one third of the peasants loyal to the government had relatives in the Viet Cong and would not provide information that could harm them.¹² The Viet Cong was subject to similar restrictions when demanding loyalty, and had to resort to various methods such as taming Vietnamese tradition to the ideological revolutionary struggle.

7 Op. cit., pp. 23–25.

8 White, 'Peasant and the Party', p. 26; E.R. Wolf, *Peasant Wars in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1969), p. 189.

9 Evidence about the traditions in the Vietnamese society can be found in N.B. Nguyen, ed., *A Thousand Years of Vietnamese Poetry* (New York, 1975), pp. 40–64.

10 Pike, *Viet Cong*, pp. 2–3.

11 *Improving Effectiveness of the Chieu Hoi Program*, vol. 2, pp. 82, 84–85.

12 Op. cit., p. 84.

The next level of loyalty of the Vietnamese peasants is accorded to the village. Most Vietnamese live in rural areas, and their connection to the land is represented in mystical-religious terms.¹³ At the head of the village stands the village elder, who is usually the eldest or richest of the village folk, thus further demonstrating Confucian hierarchy. A village council consisting of village elders assists him and holds political and judicial power.¹⁴ The village operates as a cooperative unit maintaining familial autonomy, while allowing social services to assist peasants in financial difficulties.¹⁵ Owing to geographical conditions and the lack of convenient road networks, villages are essentially economically and socially autonomous. Indeed, the traditional Vietnamese village has a measure of self-rule because of its relative isolation from imperial centres of government (the city Hue) or the centres of French government (in Saigon and Hanoi). Outsiders are considered foreigners and are not easily accepted into villages' intimate circles, so much so that their deaths went unmentioned in after-action reports detailing village casualties. When none of the villagers was killed, no casualties were reported.¹⁶ This attitude is basically xenophobic in nature, but ironically it applies to Vietnamese nationals as well.¹⁷

The third circle of allegiance for the Vietnamese peasant is religion. Vietnamese religion combines Buddhism and the familial worship of forefathers. Here too the family retains its prominent position, and every home designates a place of prayer to the gods and altars for the family ancestors.¹⁸ Most Vietnamese peasants are Buddhists, while most of the urban population is Catholic.¹⁹ This demographic and religious difference is another significant element in the village–city conflict, and had influence on the struggle in South Vietnam.²⁰ The village–city conflict was fuelled by three additional factors, both traditional and modern:

1. cities signify the seat of foreign rule with which the local rural leadership was always at odds
2. Northern Vietnamese Catholic refugees were a significant percentage of the rural population after 1954, and supported the French and the South Vietnamese governments
3. the city's western orientation and its modernization were the antithesis of the ethics and traditions of rural Vietnam.

The Vietnamese peasantry lived according to an ancient traditional code. The geographical distance from the cities and from centres of government, where most of the political

13 Pike, *Viet Cong*, p. 109.

14 See also: S.L. Popkin, *The Rational Peasant: The Political Economy of Rural Society in Vietnam* (Berkeley, 1979), p. 36; D. Pike, *War, Peace, and the Viet Cong* (Cambridge, MA, 1969), pp. 66, 68.

15 Pike, *Viet Cong*, p. 6; Popkin, *Rational Peasant*, pp. 35–36.

16 Kriegel, *Vietnamese Attitudes*, pp. 11–12.

17 *Improving Effectiveness of the Chieu Hoi Program*, vol. 2, p. 95; Kriegel, *Vietnamese Attitudes*, p. 33. On xenophobia in Vietnamese society, see also Pike, *Viet Cong*, p. 2.

18 Hickey, *Village in Vietnam*, p. 120.

19 C.A. Mortland, 'Vietnamese Tribespeople', in T.L. Gall, ed., *Encyclopedia of Culture and Daily Life*, vol. 3, *Asia and Oceania* (New York, 1998), p. 814.

20 *Improving Effectiveness of the Chieu Hoi Program*, vol. 2, p. 92.

activity was concentrated, effectively ensured that ideas such as nationalism and political-economic ideologies would remain foreign to the peasant. How then did it come to pass that Vietnamese peasants joined a modern revolutionary movement? The basic approach of Vietnamese peasantry was 'live and let live'. They expected no dramatic change in their way or quality of life, and endeavoured to live a traditional life based on the rice culture. Peasants did not seek adventure, preferring financial security for their family within the community.²¹ The Viet Cong knew how to use the Vietnamese tradition as means for achieving its own goals. But by no means can we argue that the conflict was between the Viet Cong as a rural movement against the South Vietnamese urban government.

Although many men were coerced to join the organization and it was not above resorting to terrorist methods, peasant soldiers still fought effectively for a cause not their own. Moreover, even the means of coercion were afforded by the traditional system. The attitude of the Viet Cong toward the rural population was dialectic. Basically, the Viet Cong relied on the support of the population, even a passive support, and would return in kind when such support was provided. Opposition to the organization or support of the South Vietnamese or American governments resulted in cruel measures, and would often end in executions. Nevertheless, enlistment in the organization was translated into traditional concepts, and even included an adoption of the Vietnamese familial model. Political cadres presented themselves as the fathers of the Vietnamese nation or as its teachers. These cadres were often older individuals, while the pool of potential recruits included the younger generation. The relationship was therefore based on fear and respect, in accordance with Vietnamese tradition.²² Terrorism was organized, planned, and exercised only against individuals, and rarely used as means for collective punishment. Punishment of peasants who had failed to support the Viet Cong was portrayed as the reprimand of a wayward son.²³ The punishment itself was inflicted only after a trial was held and the offences clarified for the benefit of the defendants and the villagers. Punishments were explained through traditional rather than political-ideological concepts. The crimes of condemned individuals were explained as potentially harmful to the community rather than as reflections of political opposition to the Viet Cong. Also, individuals collaborating with government forces were accused of an intention to harm peasants through anti-traditional modernization.²⁴ The basic Vietnamese perception of the world was essentially simple and allowed for a perspective in black or white terms, good or bad, and bad people must be punished.²⁵

Some explanations offered in research concerning voluntary enlistment in the Viet Cong hold that the organization was sensitive to rural traditions. The RAND research institution discussed at length the issue of cooperation between Vietnamese peasantry and the Viet Cong. According to one school, the Viet Cong succeeded in winning the hearts and minds of the peasants by introducing a pacification programme. According to another school, terror

21 Kriegel, *Vietnamese Attitudes*, p. 7.

22 Op. cit., pp. 17–19.

23 On the punishment system in the Vietnamese family, see Hickey, *Village in Vietnam*, p. 111.

24 Pike, *Viet Cong*, p. 250.

25 *Improving Effectiveness of the Chieu Hoi Program*, vol. 2, pp. 103–05.

was the primary, if not the only, reason peasants joined the Viet Cong. It is noteworthy that these two schools preached in consecutive rather than simultaneous time-frames and reflected internal changes within the RAND institute.²⁶ However, historical phenomena usually occur as a result of a multitude of factors, not one of which is ever exclusive.²⁷ Russell Betts, who basically combined the ideas of the two schools, offers a more complex interpretation.²⁸ Betts distinguishes between four courses of action employed by the peasants:

1. spontaneous political activity
2. independent action
3. coordinated and directed political activity
4. passive activity.

Betts argues that the third course of action best represents modern rural revolutions. As opposed to the second model in which leadership develops from within the ranks of the peasantry, in the third model peasants provide valuable resources, including

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- 26 For the first school, see J.C. Donnell, G.J. Pauker and J.J. Zasloff, *Viet Cong Motivation and Morale in 1964: A Preliminary Report* (Santa Monica, 1965), RG 472, CORDS INFO. LIB. files, box 10, file no. 101121; J.C. Donnell, *Viet Cong Recruitment: Why and How Men Join* (Santa Monica, 1967), RG 472, CORDS INFO. LIB. files, box 18, file no. 101212. Donnell argued that the strength of the Viet Cong position within the peasantry stemmed from the respect it demonstrated toward their traditions. The propaganda that followed did not indoctrinate peasantry in the tenets of Communism but was rather directed toward the military and the government. It stated that the latter failed to understand the spirit and the essence of peasants and was fighting against them. For an additional study emphasizing the break between the peasantry and the government, see N. Leites, *The Viet Cong Style of Politics* (Santa Monica, 1969), RG 472, CORDS INFO. LIB. files, RG 472, box 8, file no. 101091. Leites held that the Vietnam War was not an economy-based class struggle, because neighbouring regions suffered graver economic difficulties and did not rebel. He explained that the war was a cultural struggle between traditional forces (peasantry) and progressive forces (government) inadvertently injuring tradition. His thesis is problematic, because Communists had in fact attempted to take over Laos, Cambodia, and even Thailand. Indeed, agrarian-Communist uprisings had been suppressed shortly before the Vietnam War in the Philippines and Malaya. For the second school, see L. Goure, *Inducement and Deterrents of Defection: An Analysis of the Motives of 125 Defectors* (Santa Monica, 1968). This study will be discussed further shortly. Another study argued that terror played a significant role in the enlistment of peasantry in the Viet Cong: R.M. Pearce, *The Insurgent Environment* (Santa Monica, 1969), RG 472, CORDS INFO. LIB. files, box 32, file no. 101392. Pearce argued that the Viet Cong used terror and coercion to destroy the social fabric and isolate peasants from their village and family.
- 27 It is unclear whether the transformation in the RAND attitude represented internal power-games or a change in personnel.
- 28 R.H. Betts, *Viet Cong Village Control: Some Observations on the Origin and Dynamics of Modern Revolutionary War* (Cambridge, MA, 1969), pp. 1–15. The first part of the study offers a comprehensive theory explaining why peasants join revolutionary movements. The second part examines its validity through the experience of a South Vietnamese village.

supplies, manpower, information, and shelter, but are recruited by external forces.²⁹ According to Betts, debates regarding motivations to join revolutionary movements are irrelevant since external political forces lead the peasants. The combination of both attitudes is reflected in the development of the relationship between the peasantry and guerrilla forces.

Betts explains that the Viet Cong first adopted the traditional village models and then took them over through various means, including terror. In addition, it appears that peasants were often compelled to join the organization, and not only for the reasons discussed hitherto. Also, if peasants joined the Viet Cong because of its sensitivity to tradition, how does one account for the high desertion effected through the CHP?³⁰ If rural commitment to the cause had been cemented on the basis of the organization's sensitivity to tradition, why then were desertion rates highest following the Tet offensive and especially during 1969, when the organization desperately needed every man? Moreover, it should be remembered that many peasants joined the South Vietnamese army, and many served under US command in various militias. A significant percentage of the deserters later joined organic US units through the Kit Carson Scout Program (KCSP). Strengthening this reservation is the fact that Vietnamese society is not inherently militant, and years of military struggles have not increased the number of violent outbursts in rural areas to any significant degree. The professional soldier occupied one of the bottom rungs of the Vietnamese social ladder. Nevertheless, the peasants who joined the various fighting forces throughout Vietnamese history exhibited great personal courage.³¹ The Vietnamese had also been among the few who had successfully withstood the Mongol onslaughts. Researchers at the various research institutions knew these facts.

In order to understand the success of the Viet Cong recruitment better, it is necessary to examine the reasons that led to the eventual high rates of desertion.

III. Recruitment to the Viet Cong

Support of the Viet Cong was based on familial loyalty: it alone can explain why peasants whose world revolved around the family and the rice paddy would risk all and join the movement. These trends must be explained through traditional concepts and the importance accorded to the family in Vietnamese society. Few peasants joined the movement out of ideology, i.e. belief in the Communist way.³² Peasant support of the Viet

29 Op. cit., pp. 2–3. See also: T. Shanin, 'The Peasantry As a Political Factor', *Sociological Review* XIV (1966), pp. 19–21.

30 It is assumed that more than 159,000 Vietnamese deserted between 1963 and 1973. Regarding the programme, see C.D. Laurie, 'Chieu Hoi', in S.C. Tucker, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War: A Political, Social, and Military History*, vol. 1 (Santa Barbara, 1998), p. 115.

31 Op. cit.; Kriegel, *Vietnamese Attitudes*, pp. 13 and 16. It is noteworthy that violence in general and murder in particular are rare in this society. It offers great respect to women and shuns physical disciplinary measures.

32 *Improving Effectiveness of the Chieu Hoi Program*, vol. 2, p. 107.

Cong signified support of the Farmers' Liberation Association (FLA), established by the Viet Cong, which called for comprehensive agrarian reform.³³ The guerrilla forces offered economic opportunities for peasants and were therefore perceived as leaders of a social revolution.³⁴ Success of the revolution would improve the peasants' economic standing and turn them into landowners. Betts argues that peasants join revolutionary movements in order to preserve their traditional way of life, which includes protection of land and family from social, cultural, and economic changes. He adds that joining the ranks of protest movements sometimes stemmed from a desire to improve the standard of living.³⁵ On the basis of this argument, one may maintain that the peasantry joined an organization³⁶ that was strong at the time (in both political and military terms) in the hopes of preserving its way of life. This theory may explain the changes in peasantry orientation, its lack of allegiance to one side, and the transference of its allegiance in accordance with political and military developments in its immediate sphere. The preservation of traditional institutions (family, village, land) may also entail an attempt to improve the standard of living. Douglas Pike holds that the Vietnamese have no tradition of allegiance to any one political power but rather confer it according to changes that occur in its immediate sphere.³⁷

Interviews of deserters from the Viet Cong through the CHP revealed that recruits often followed in the footsteps of family members, essentially translating familial allegiance into a political one. The rural tradition is based on allegiance to the leader rather than to the movement, the ideology of which the peasant does not understand. Thus, peasants joined the Viet Cong, or the government-sponsored militia, because another family member had already done so. In addition, recruitment to the Viet Cong also removed an existing Viet Cong threat to the very foundation of the family.³⁸ Recruitment to both the Viet Cong and the state-sponsored militia was often dependent upon the political-military situation in rural Vietnam. The peasants joined the ranks of those who promised physical and economic security. Peasants often joined the ranks of the organization that had first arrived in the village. Until 1965, joining the Viet Cong and remaining close to the family was a better option than joining the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, which had been suffering severe setbacks. In addition, army recruits were often posted in faraway battlefields.³⁹ Similar factors are revealed in the discussion of female recruitment to the Viet Cong, as is demonstrated

33 The FLA was established in accordance with the teachings of Mao, who believed that peasants were the driving force of the Communist revolution. However, since the peasants were ignorant of Communism, a body was formed to enforce discipline. Pike, *Viet Cong*, pp. 167–72.

34 Op. cit., p. 166; N. Leites and C. Wolf, *Rebellion and Authority: An Analytic Essay on Insurgent Conflict* (Chicago, 1970), pp. 41–45.

35 Betts, *Viet Cong Village Control*, p. 7.

36 The terms 'body' and 'organization' refer both to the Viet Cong and the forces of the South Vietnamese or US governments.

37 Pike, *Viet Cong*, p. 10.

38 Op. cit., pp. 107–09. See also the story of one fighter who enlisted after his mother had been threatened: op. cit., p. 106. See also Kriegel, *Vietnamese Attitudes*, pp. 20 and 30.

39 Pike, *Viet Cong*, pp. 111, 113–15.

in Sandra Taylor's study of Vietnamese women during the war. She argues that female recruits were quite young (15–17), and joined the movement not out of ideological conviction but rather for personal reasons and because they wished to protect their families.⁴⁰

A contemporary ARPA study lists additional reasons believed by Americans to have led to peasantry enlistment in the Viet Cong.⁴¹ These reasons include personal problems within the familial circle and difficulties arising from relations with the village authorities. Also, peasants whose fields were situated in territories held by the Viet Cong joined the organization in order to protect their financial interests; these actions reinforced the Viet Cong claim that joining the organization protected peasant interests. Some peasants joined the organization wishing to avenge the death of a family member killed by the government or by forces allied to it. A 1967 study stated that revenge against the South Vietnamese government became more prevalent. Several individuals stated that they had joined the Viet Cong since the French harmed their families, and they could now exact their revenge. Hence, it is apparent that the governments of South Vietnam and the United States were perceived as a continuation of French rule. The government was perceived as a continuation of the hated (primarily for religious reasons) Diem regime, which had itself been perceived as a substitute for the detested French colonialists.⁴² Thus a direct link was established between the South Vietnamese government and French colonialism. Many peasants joined the Viet Cong after suffering at the hands of government officials and military forces. It should be noted that these harsh sentiments directed against the government and its allies (especially the United States) were further inflamed by Viet Cong propaganda. The government was criticized for the killing of civilians.

Some peasants joined the ranks of the Viet Cong out of a sense of adventure. Also, the younger generation realized that rural life offered little chance for self-realization and were searching for alternatives, which the Viet Cong professed to afford. Research indicates that Communist propaganda was translated into concepts familiar to the peasantry. Peasants did not understand the essence of Communist theory, the struggle against capitalism, the class struggle, or historical theories of Communism and socialism.⁴³ A 1964 RAND study states decisively that most recruits failed to understand the essence of Communism. Interviewees stated that political cadres' authority was accepted because of Confucian tradition rather than through ideological conviction. Even educated deserters interviewed by RAND researchers were unable to detail the essence of socialist and Communist teachings.⁴⁴ Researchers concluded that Communism was perceived to promise an improvement in the standard of living

40 S.C. Taylor, *Vietnamese Women at War: Fighting for Ho Chi Minh and the Revolution* (Lawrence, 1999), p. 75.

41 *Improving Effectiveness of the Chieu Hoi Program*, vol. 2, pp. 115–20.

42 *Op. cit.*, pp. 118–19.

43 Pool found similar reasons when he discussed enlistment of senior cadres. I. de S. Pool, 'Political Alternatives to the Viet Cong', *Asian Survey* VII (1967), pp. 555–57. These include a desire for economic and social mobility, national sentiments, enlistment of another family member, and physical or economic suffering at the hands of imperialists, be they French or their successors. Other studies report similar findings.

44 Donnell et al., *Viet Cong Motivation*, pp. 35–38.

and to provide economic welfare through its demand for comprehensive agrarian reform and provision of land to the peasantry. Class struggle was understood to denote a struggle against estate holders living in the cities and identified with the central government.⁴⁵

Kriegel and Pike argue that peasants also joined the Viet Cong out of nationalist reasons. The Vietnamese sought a unification of the north and the south. However, this motivation was not based on Communist doctrine but rather on the long history of Vietnam as a nation. Cultural Vietnamese elements such as language, poetry, literature, music, and drama were more important than any political ideology or agenda. Kriegel maintains that this nationalist spirit had combined economic, social, and political elements in the struggle against French colonialism. Viet Cong propaganda depicted the South Vietnamese government as a political body opposed to Vietnamese unification.⁴⁶ These conclusions were based on hundreds of interviews conducted with CHP-related deserters, prisoners, and refugees.

IV. Desertion from the Viet Cong

In order to enhance the understanding of factors leading to enlistment in the Viet Cong, one should also examine the factors leading to desertion from it. As will be demonstrated shortly, desertion from the organization stemmed partially from the understanding that fighting for the Viet Cong would not solve issues that had led to enlistment. What then were the reasons for desertion? Two studies conducted by the RAND institute were devoted to this issue.⁴⁷ These studies are based on interviews of deserters, as well as on Viet Cong documents captured in US military operations. It appears that the conclusions are based primarily on the former and that the researchers believed that the interviewees were representative of the deserters in general, a group comprising guerrilla fighters, officers (up to battalion level), political cadres, and civilians who supported the organization.

Most deserters offered multiple reasons for desertion, all of which are detailed in these studies. The figures below represent the number of individuals who professed to have deserted for various reasons. A brief examination of the figures indicates that motivation for desertion stemmed primarily from personal rather than ideological motivation. The personal reasons included fear of death, food shortages, sleep deprivation, weather conditions and natural disasters, diseases and primitive medical care, and the constant moves, which prohibited contact with the family.⁴⁸ Deserters ranked highly knowledge that a family member's enlistment had upset the family's economic capacities. This implied decreasing income due to the narrowing of workforce, heavy taxation by the Viet Cong, and the latter's inability to support the families of recruits financially. Deserters

45 Op. cit., p. 122.

46 Kriegel, *Vietnamese Attitudes*, pp. 14–15; Pike, *Viet Cong*, pp. 2 and 100.

47 J.M. Carrier and C.H. Thompson, *Viet Cong Motivation and Morale: The Special Case of Chieu Hoi* (Santa Monica, 1966), RG 472, CORDS INFO. LIB. files, box 4, file no. 101043 (hereafter: RAND 1966); Goure, *Inducement* (hereafter: RAND 1968).

48 RAND 1966: 48%; RAND 1968: 50%.

also explained desertion in terms of missing their families.⁴⁹ So long as service in the Viet Cong allowed peasants to remain close to home they did not feel compelled to desert since they could support their families during the day and don the uniform at night. Motivation for desertion increased when, as a result of intensive US/South Vietnamese military operations, Viet Cong units were forced to travel further away to seek shelter.⁵⁰ The contact with home suffered also when villages were relocated to secure zones, and this resulted in higher desertion rates.

Fear of death was more prominent for those who had experienced American fire-power capacity, especially aerial bombing.⁵¹ A combination of the 1966 RAND study figures – ‘fear of war’ (20%), ‘fear of American power’ (11%), and ‘defeat in battle’ (3%) – indicates that over one third of the interviewees deserted because of fear of war. According to the 1968 RAND study, this figure had increased to 47%.⁵² Many interviewees noted that the Viet Cong could never hope to defeat the economic, political, and military power of the South Vietnamese army, supported as it was by endless masses of American equipment, weapons, and personnel. In both studies personal reasons and interests ranked high among motivations for desertions.⁵³ The 1968 study notes that 18% of the interviewees deserted after concluding that they could derive no further personal or economic benefit from service in the Viet Cong. This argument is reinforced by the fact that many of the interviewees professed to have heard of the CHP before enlisting in the Viet Cong, which had at the time been stronger than the South Vietnamese forces. The organization’s perceived inability to match American military power had resulted in desertion.⁵⁴

The political climate in South Vietnam had a negligible influence on desertion. In addition, few people professed to have deserted because they had been recruited forcefully.⁵⁵ Similarly, other ideological reasons were ranked low and were usually professed by individuals carrying higher military and political ranks. The common soldier rarely cited an ideological motivation for desertion. This is reinforced by the claim made by some deserters that criticism or punishment by political cadres led them to desert.⁵⁶ Many interviewees said that the numerous hours of indoctrination classes robbed them of their freedom, and that the Communist models contradicted their own belief system.⁵⁷ The motivation for desertion in this case was based on social rather than on political differences. Moreover, deserters witnessed a rise in the standard of living for their families

49 RAND 1966: 18%; RAND 1968: 20%.

50 RAND 1968, pp. 32–33.

51 Op. cit., p. 37.

52 Interestingly, fear of US fire-power led many Iraqis to desert during the Gulf War, and generally affected their morale and desire to fight. See Department of Defense, *Conduct of the Persian Gulf War: Final Report to Congress* (Washington, DC, 1992), p. 536.

53 RAND 1966, p. 34; RAND 1968, p. 37.

54 RAND 1966, p. 82.

55 RAND 1966: 14%; RAND 1968: 7%.

56 RAND 1966: 22%; RAND 1968: 28%

57 RAND 1966, p. 37. See also *Improving Effectiveness of the Chieu Hoi Program*, vol. 2, pp. 172–73.

as a result of the pacification programme instituted by the South Vietnamese government in conjunction with American military and civilian agencies.⁵⁸

According to these studies, desertion was the result of a process rather than a spontaneous decision, but they cannot provide a concrete time-frame for the process because the Vietnamese do not subscribe to the western concept of time.⁵⁹ The process of desertion was tightly connected with information concerning the CHP. A Viet Cong fighter deserted only after studying the government plan with the assistance of several (perceived) reliable sources. Though many had heard of the programme they had difficulty believing it was not some kind of trick, and that the price for desertion would not actually be jail time or a firing squad. And yet individuals who had decided to leave the organization did not return to the village but transferred their loyalty to government forces through CHP centres. The aforementioned reliable sources for a potential deserter included his family and family members who had gone through the process and could verify that living standards were indeed being raised.⁶⁰ Here too one may see the importance of the family to the process of the individual's decision-making. The significance of the family is further demonstrated by the decision-making process of those who decided not to desert or postponed the action itself, because they feared the price for their actions would be exacted on their families. Some people deserted only once their families had been relocated to secure government areas protected by South Vietnamese or US forces.⁶¹

The studies indicate that the motivations for desertion prevalent in 1966 remained essentially unaltered in 1968. The most significant difference between the two periods is found in the increase in desertion due to fear of death.⁶² This difference is easily explained, as the latter study was conducted following the Tet offensive in which the Viet Cong had suffered such debilitating blows that it no longer presented a political-military threat to South Vietnam. Regular North Vietnamese forces using guerrilla tactics took its place. Most of the political cadres hailed from North Vietnam. Nevertheless, as demonstrated above, the combination of several military-related factors (defeat, death of a friend, aerial bombing) draws the figures of the 1966 study closer to those of the 1968 study.

V. Conclusion

This article has focused on motivations for Vietnamese peasants' enlistment in and desertion from the Viet Cong. Peasants that had deserted did not return to their villages but stayed in government centres for varying periods of time. A significant number of deserters underwent a dramatic change in orientation and enlisted in the South Vietnamese army or even the US Army.

It is difficult to explain these developments in terms of ideological motivations. The argument according to which desertion was a result of forced recruitment does not

58 RAND 1966, p. 40.

59 See Kriegel, *Vietnamese Attitudes*, pp. 23–24.

60 RAND 1968, pp. 21, 26.

61 RAND 1966, pp. 49–56; RAND 1968, p. 18.

62 In the 1966 study, 20%, versus 43% in the 1968 study.

account for the fact that these individuals chose to do so through the CHP and often even to fight their former comrades in the ranks of the KCSP.

The use of traditional models, however, may provide a more comprehensive explanation for the reasons Vietnamese peasants chose to enlist in or desert from the Viet Cong. An analysis of the Vietnamese peasant ethos, mainly the desire to improve their standard of living, accounts for this phenomenon. Although many deserters noted the devastating effects of American fire-power as one of their primary motivations for desertion, economic reasons were significant too, and often no less significant. Peasants enlisted in the Viet Cong believing it could provide the changes they desired as a result of its military primacy at that time and in that place.

Once their unit had suffered defeat, its material conditions deteriorated and the peasants began receiving information on the economic benefits afforded through the CHP, they no longer felt committed to the Viet Cong and deserted to the organization which provided better financial benefits. This dynamic may explain also desertion from the ranks of the South Vietnamese army back to the Viet Cong.

Changing military fortunes also accounted for the shifting of the Vietnamese peasant between sides. US military documents reveal cases where peasants deserted from the Viet Cong several times, a situation easily explained by their motivation to improve their socio-economic standing.