



The Economy of the Liberated Zone in Southern Vietnam during the Anti-American Resistance War (1960–1975): Local Resources and Rear-Base Strategy

Pham Van Think¹

Abstract

This article examines a subject of particular significance in understanding the mobilization and organization of resistance resources in the liberated zone of Southern Vietnam during the anti-American resistance war (1960–1975). Drawing on an interdisciplinary historical–economic analytical framework, the study employs Party documents, historical records, eyewitness memoirs, and selected doctoral dissertations to reconstruct the formation, development, and operation of the local rear-base economic model in the liberated zone. The findings demonstrate that the liberated zone of Southern Vietnam functioned as a crucial strategic rear, playing a decisive role in sustaining both the material and spiritual strength of the resistance movement. This process encompassed four key dimensions: (1) the establishment of flexible base areas capable of adapting to guerrilla warfare; (2) the organization of large-scale local production based on a prosperous agricultural foundation and popular mobilization; (3) the development of a multi-layered resource mobilization and distribution mechanism that combined local capacity, North–South support, and international aid; and (4) the creation of a centralized yet flexible leadership and organizational model that ensured long-term logistical resilience. This article contributes an economic and organizational perspective to the historiography of the anti-American resistance in Vietnam.

Keywords: anti-American resistance war, liberated zones of Southern Vietnam, rear-base economy, resource mobilization

Introduction

In modern Vietnamese history, the anti-American resistance war (1954–1975) represents a decisive period in the struggle for national liberation and reunification. This conflict was not merely a military confrontation between revolutionary forces in the South and the United States-backed Saigon administration, but a comprehensive people's war that mobilized political, military, economic, cultural, and diplomatic systems, along with the material and spiritual resources of the Vietnamese people. Within this context, the liberated zones of Southern Vietnam held a particularly strategic position, functioning simultaneously as frontline battlefields and on-the-spot rear bases that made substantial contributions to the overall revolutionary victory (Ministry of Defence, 1985).

Following the Dong Khoi (General Uprising) movement of 1960, the system of liberated zones gradually took shape and expanded across key geopolitical areas such as U Minh, the Plain of Reeds (Dong Thap Muoi), Rung Sac,

¹ Lecturer at the Thu Dau Mot University; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-4514-191X>; E-mail: thinkpv@tdmu.edu.vn

Tay Ninh, and Cu Chi (Giau, 1995). Under conditions of intense warfare – when the socialist North was geographically distant and supply routes were frequently disrupted – the liberated zones assumed a critical role as spaces for the production, accumulation, and distribution of material resources. These functions were essential for sustaining combat operations, supporting armed forces, and ensuring the long-term endurance of the southern battlefield (Dinh, 1979).

A distinctive feature of the anti-American resistance war was its “three-tier rear-base structure”: the international rear base, the socialist North as the central strategic support base, and the on-the-spot rear base constituted by liberated zones within Southern Vietnam. Within this structure, the local rear base was not merely a recipient of external assistance but actively organized production, mobilized internal resources, and managed distribution networks, reflecting the creative capacity of the southern revolution.

Despite its strategic importance, scholarly research on the economy of the liberated zones in Southern Vietnam remains limited compared to studies emphasizing military, political, or diplomatic dimensions. Existing literature largely focuses on campaigns and political–social movements, while the economic, financial, and logistical mechanisms underpinning the liberated zones have not been comprehensively systematized. In this context, closer examination of the local rear-base economic model is essential for reconstructing a more holistic understanding of the anti-American resistance war and for illuminating the organizational capacity, resource mobilization strategies, and resilience of the southern revolution.

Drawing on archival materials, domestic and international scholarship, and eyewitness accounts, this article examines: (1) the formation context and economic characteristics of the liberated zones; (2) patterns of local production and internal trade; (3) mechanisms of resource mobilization and distribution; and (4) the organizational and leadership model of the on-the-spot rear base in Southern Vietnam.

Literature Review

Research on the economy of the liberated zones in Southern Vietnam during the anti-American resistance war (1960–1975) is grounded in a diverse body of sources, including Party documents, eyewitness memoirs, archival materials, domestic scholarly works, and a limited number of international studies. However, the depth of analysis, analytical scope, and thematic focus of these sources vary considerably, reflecting the gradual development of this field of inquiry.

Official documents of the Communist Party of Vietnam constitute a foundational source for understanding the strategic role of liberated zones in the resistance war. Notably, *The Complete Party Documents, Volume 21* (CPV, 2002), explicitly defines the liberated zones as a strategic tier within the “three-tier rear-base structure” (international – North Vietnam – on-the-spot). These documents articulate key principles such as self-reliance, the organization of local production, and the integration of northern support with international aid, thereby outlining the framework for a comprehensive wartime logistical system.

In addition, political writings and memoirs by senior revolutionary leaders, including Duan (1993) and Giap (1979), provide valuable insights into the leadership and strategic direction of rear-base construction. These works emphasize the centrality of rural economies, revolutionary finance, and local logistics in people's war, offering important perspectives on the ideological and practical foundations of wartime economic organization.

Over the past three decades, a growing number of historical and military studies have addressed aspects of the economy of the liberated zones in Southern Vietnam, albeit often as a secondary concern. Representative works include *Southeastern Vietnam in the Resistance War, 1945–1975* (Command of Military Region 7, 1990); *Southern Vietnam in the Anti-American Resistance: Documents and Reflections* (PECHCMCPV, 2015); *The General Offensive and Uprising of the 1968 Tết Offensive* (Dang, 1990); and *The History of the Central Office for Economic and Financial Affairs of the Southern Region during the Anti-American Resistance* (An, 2006). More recently, Lương Tuyết Mai's doctoral dissertation (2025) has directly examined economic activities in the liberated zones of Southern Vietnam during the resistance period. These studies have begun to outline the economic and financial structures of the liberated zones, including systems of taxation, internal trade, and resource mobilization and distribution networks.

Furthermore, specialized studies by Hong (1997), Hong & Tien (2010), Huyen (1997), and various local research reports provide detailed empirical data on land policies, agricultural production organization, inter-zone trade, and the role of Economic–Financial Committees in managing the wartime economy (Hoai, 1969). These works contribute important micro-level perspectives on how economic policies were implemented under conditions of armed conflict.

Despite these contributions, existing scholarship has largely focused on political and military dimensions, while analyses of economic structures, production organization, internal commerce, and financial mobilization remain fragmented and insufficiently integrated. There is still a lack of comprehensive, systematic studies that conceptualize the liberated zones as a coherent economic and logistical system. This gap underscores the need for an interdisciplinary historical–economic–social approach to reconstruct and explain the functioning of the liberated zones as a strategic rear base during the anti-American resistance war.

Methodology

The study of the economy of the liberated zones in Southern Vietnam during the anti-American resistance war (1960–1975) constitutes an interdisciplinary historical–economic inquiry, requiring a flexible integration of historical methods, socio-economic analysis, and empirical approaches. The primary objective is to systematically reconstruct the formation, organization, and operation of the on-the-spot rear-base economy under conditions of prolonged, intense, and asymmetrical people's war.

The historical method is employed throughout the study to trace the emergence and development of the liberated zones in Southern Vietnam. By situating economic phenomena within their specific historical contexts—from

the aftermath of the *Đông Khởi* movement in 1960 to the complete liberation of the South in 1975—this research analyzes transformations in production structures, resource mobilization, and the organization of local rear bases. This approach enables the identification of the distinctive characteristics of the liberated-zone economy, which was profoundly shaped by political–military dynamics as well as natural and socio-economic conditions.

Based on both primary and secondary sources, qualitative content analysis is applied to identify and examine key themes related to agricultural production, handicrafts and small-scale industry, financial mobilization, internal trade, rear-base organization, and political leadership. These data are cross-checked and triangulated to ensure historical accuracy and analytical reliability. In addition, to explain the operational mechanisms of the liberated-zone economy, the study combines historical analysis with socio-economic analytical frameworks. Documentary evidence is synthesized thematically to reconstruct a “dynamic portrait” of the people’s war economy in Southern Vietnam. This integrated approach facilitates a clearer understanding of how economic activities were interwoven with political and military processes, reflecting the strategic nature of the rear base.

In addition to archival materials and official documents, the study draws upon eyewitness memoirs and personal recollections. These sources provide vivid empirical details that complement and corroborate secondary literature, allowing for a more nuanced reconstruction of the organization and functioning of the local economy under wartime conditions.

Results and Discussion

Formation Process and Characteristics of the Liberated Zones in Southern Vietnam

The emergence and development of the liberated zones in Southern Vietnam were closely associated with major strategic shifts in the anti-American resistance war, particularly from the period following the 1954 Geneva Accords to the outbreak of the *Đông Khởi* movement in 1960. After the Accords, Southern Vietnam came under the control of the U.S.-backed Saigon administration, which implemented extensive repression against revolutionary forces and exercised strict control over land and socio-economic life. Nevertheless, the deeply rooted revolutionary traditions of the southern population, combined with pre-existing resistance networks from the anti-French war, created favorable conditions for the rapid establishment of new revolutionary base areas.

A critical turning point in this process was the *Dong Khoi* movement of 1960, which began in Ben Tre and quickly spread across numerous provinces, districts, and communes throughout the South. This movement severely undermined the Saigon administration’s rural control apparatus, creating power vacuums that revolutionary forces exploited to establish local revolutionary governments. On this basis, the first liberated zones emerged, concentrating in areas with advantageous geographical and socio-economic conditions such as U Minh, the Plain of Reeds (*Dong Thap Muoi*), Tay Ninh, Rung Sac, and Cu Chi. These areas functioned as strategic base zones characterized by difficult terrain, limited enemy accessibility, and proximity to major transportation routes linking Eastern and Western Southern Vietnam.

The expansion of the liberated zones followed two principal directions. In the Mekong Delta, base areas capitalized on riverine landscapes, melaleuca forests, and mangrove ecosystems, providing secure shelters, defensive advantages, and convenient logistics and production conditions. In Eastern Southern Vietnam, base zones were located near major urban centers—particularly Saigon—serving as strategic springboards for military and political operations targeting the enemy’s command centers. Importantly, these liberated zones did not constitute fixed territorial entities; rather, they fluctuated in response to battlefield dynamics, interspersed with contested and enemy-controlled areas. This flexible spatial structure enabled revolutionary forces to expand influence while avoiding complete encirclement.

Natural, economic, and social characteristics further facilitated the development of the liberated zones. Dense river networks, fertile plains, extensive mangrove forests, and abundant natural resources provided a solid material foundation for food, supplies, and manpower. The predominantly agrarian population possessed strong patriotic traditions, experience in land reclamation and agricultural production, and familiarity with guerrilla warfare. These social conditions proved crucial for mobilizing labor, organizing production, and consolidating civil–military unity within the liberated zones.

Equally decisive were political and organizational factors. The liberated zones operated under the unified leadership of the Central Office for Southern Vietnam and the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam, which provided strategic direction and coordinated military, political, and economic activities. This centralized leadership ensured that the liberated zones not only survived but expanded and consolidated despite the intensity of the war. Overall, the formation of the liberated zones in Southern Vietnam was a prolonged historical process shaped by regional geographical and socio-economic conditions and by centralized revolutionary leadership. This process laid the essential foundation for the liberated zones to function as effective on-the-spot rear bases contributing decisively to the final victory of the anti-American resistance.

Local Production Activities

One of the central pillars of the economic model of the liberated zones in Southern Vietnam during the anti-American resistance was the organization of local production. Under conditions of prolonged warfare and multi-layered encirclement, this production system not only met the subsistence needs of both civilians and combatants but also supplied the majority of food, materials, and financial resources required for major military campaigns. It represented a concrete manifestation of the principle of self-reliance in people’s war and constituted a key source of resilience for the local rear base.

Southern Vietnam, as the region’s primary rice-producing area, benefited from fertile soils, extensive river and canal systems, and a favorable climate. Revolutionary authorities in the liberated zones reorganized land relations through policies such as “land to the tiller,” redistributing abandoned land and landlord holdings to poor peasants. These measures expanded

cultivated areas, strengthened civil–military alliances, and mobilized broad peasant participation in the resistance.

From the early 1960s, mutual-aid teams and cooperative production units were established to pool labor resources. Given wartime conditions, the workforce largely consisted of women, the elderly, and youth. These flexible collective production models helped maintain stable output levels and secure food supplies. By the late 1960s, regions such as U Minh, the Plain of Reeds, and Tay Ninh had become major “revolutionary rice baskets,” supplying hundreds of tons of rice to armed forces and liberated-zone populations. In addition to rice, short-term industrial crops (sugarcane, jute, cotton, coconut) and essential food crops (vegetables, tubers, maize) were promoted to diversify supply sources. Rubber plantations in revolutionary-controlled areas of Eastern Southern Vietnam became important financial resources, sustaining employment while contributing revenue to the resistance economy.

If agriculture constituted the “food rear base,” then handicrafts and small-scale industry formed the “technical rear base” of the liberated zones. Due to enemy blockades, revolutionary forces could not rely solely on northern support, rendering local workshops indispensable. Production facilities were established in key base areas such as Tay Ninh, Cu Chi, Rung Sac, and the Plain of Reeds, drawing on the skills of local artisans, former industrial workers, and revolutionary technicians.

Primary activities included: (1) simple mechanics, such as repairing agricultural tools and transport equipment and manufacturing improvised weapons; (2) food processing, including rice milling and the production of crude sugar, salt, and fish sauce; (3) tailoring and equipment production, supplying uniforms, hammocks, rubber sandals, and backpacks; and (4) wartime medical production, including herbal medicines and basic medical instruments. A distinctive feature was the mobility of production workshops, which could relocate quickly during enemy raids, preserving manpower and maintaining continuity of output. In several base areas, clusters of production facilities functioned as localized “engineering workshops” supporting combat logistics.

The liberated-zone economy was not closed but embedded within internal trade networks, often intersecting with enemy-controlled areas. Revolutionary rural markets emerged as exchange hubs linking peasants, cooperatives, military units, and small traders. Commodities included agricultural products, foodstuffs, daily necessities, medical supplies, uniforms, and captured goods. Semi-legal inter-zone trade enabled merchants to transport goods between liberated and enemy-held areas under revolutionary supervision. Through this system, the liberated zones obtained essential items such as salt, fuel, pharmaceuticals, and small machinery that could not be produced locally.

Local production activities held strategic significance for sustaining the resistance. First, they enabled a high degree of material self-sufficiency, reducing dependence on northern support and enhancing resilience against blockades and sweeps. Second, production organization mobilized large segments of the population, integrating economic activities with political and military objectives and forming a localized “resistance ecosystem.” Third,

flexible production and trade stabilized civilian livelihoods, reinforced popular support for the revolution, and enhanced the durability of the liberated zones.

Mechanisms of Resource Mobilization and Distribution

One of the most distinctive innovations of the southern revolution during the anti-American resistance was the establishment of a relatively comprehensive system for mobilizing and distributing economic and logistical resources. This system integrated local capacities within the liberated zones with support from the socialist North and international assistance. Despite operating under severe encirclement, blockade, and geographical fragmentation, it sustained material strength across the southern battlefield for fifteen years.

From the early 1960s, the Central Office for Southern Vietnam established the Economic–Financial Committee (Ban Kinh–Tai), a specialized institution responsible for centralized management of economic and financial activities in the liberated zones. Its core functions were twofold: mobilizing and receiving resources from multiple channels, and organizing their unified distribution to strategic areas, major campaigns, and civilian needs.

The committee operated through a three-tier structure. At the Central Office level, it coordinated overall strategy, managed aggregate budgets, and allocated resources to zones, provinces, and fronts. At zone and provincial levels, local committees collected contributions, received external support, and managed materials and finances. At grassroots levels, local organizations mobilized popular contributions, organized production, and directly supplied armed forces and civilian laborers. This vertically integrated structure ensured centralized coordination while preserving local flexibility, appropriate to the fluid territorial conditions of the liberated zones.

Local resources constituted the foundational component of the logistical system. Revolutionary authorities implemented “đảm phụ” – a distinctive form of wartime financial mobilization–encompassing agricultural contributions (rice and crops), industrial and commercial levies on handicraft producers and traders, and fees on inter-zone trade. Notably, these measures were based on voluntary participation and social consensus rather than coercion. Contribution levels were adjusted flexibly according to local conditions, maintaining social trust while ensuring sufficient resources. Revenues supported troop sustenance, equipment procurement, production assistance, and financial reserves for major campaigns.

Parallel to local mobilization, support from the socialist North constituted a strategic lifeline, particularly during periods of intensified warfare. After 1960, logistical routes such as the Trường Sơn land corridor and maritime supply lines became primary channels of support. Northern assistance was transferred through two main methods: direct transport of cash and materials via overland routes (AM method), and indirect financial transfers through intermediary commercial networks in Hong Kong and Saigon (FM method). These resources–comprising cash, foreign currency, weapons, uniforms, food, medicine, and technical equipment–proved decisive for major campaigns including the 1968 Tet Offensive and the 1975 Hồ Chí Minh Campaign.

International assistance from socialist countries and global revolutionary movements further supplemented this system. Such aid, largely routed through the North and distributed via the Economic–Financial Committee, assumed particular importance during the most intense phases of the war.

Following mobilization, resources were distributed according to unified principles: prioritizing strategic areas, balancing military supply with civilian needs, and combining centralized allocation with local discretion. This mechanism enabled the liberated-zone economy to function stably despite encirclement, through flexible integration of external support and internal capacities.

Organizational and Leadership Model of the On-the-Spot Rear Base

To effectively mobilize, organize, and utilize resources under conditions of prolonged people’s war, the liberated zones of Southern Vietnam developed a relatively comprehensive organizational and leadership model for the on-the-spot rear base. This model functioned not only as an economic–logistical coordination system but also as a central political and social pillar of the liberated zones.

At the core of this system was the Central Office for Southern Vietnam, which represented the Party’s central authority in the southern battlefield. It formulated strategic directives on production, financial mobilization, rear-base construction, and coordination with northern support. Specialized committees—including the Economic–Financial Committee and the Logistics Committee—translated these directives into operational plans suited to each phase of the war.

A defining feature of this model was the close integration of political leadership and economic management. Decisions on production and distribution were consistently aligned with military operational planning, ensuring strategic coherence. The system operated across three interconnected levels: the Central Office, zone and provincial administrations, and grassroots units. This structure balanced centralized leadership with decentralized implementation, allowing local units to sustain operations even when territories were temporarily contracted by enemy offensives.

The rear-base organization was deeply embedded within popular movements. Through mass mobilization campaigns, revolutionary authorities linked economic production with social welfare, reinforcing popular trust and political commitment. Inter-agency coordination among economic, military, logistical, and political bodies created an integrated resistance network in which rear bases and frontlines functioned as mutually reinforcing components.

Overall, the organizational and leadership model of the on-the-spot rear base in Southern Vietnam represented a strategic innovation of the Vietnamese revolution. It ensured stable resource provision, enhanced autonomy and adaptability under conditions of encirclement, strengthened civil–military cohesion, and fostered a comprehensive “resistance ecosystem” integrating economic, political, and military dimensions.

Conclusion

During the anti-American resistance war, the liberated zones of Southern Vietnam assumed a uniquely strategic role: they functioned simultaneously as the direct frontline of the southern revolution and as a resilient on-the-spot rear base, making a decisive contribution to the nation's ultimate victory in 1975. Building upon favorable geographical, economic, and social conditions, and under the unified leadership of the Central Office for Southern Vietnam and the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam, the liberated zones developed a distinctive model of a people's war economy capable of mobilizing, organizing, and distributing resources effectively under conditions of encirclement and fragmentation.

First, the formation of the liberated zones was closely linked to major turning points in the southern revolutionary movement, particularly following the *Đông Khởi* movement of 1960. Rather than constituting fixed territorial entities, the liberated zones expanded and contracted flexibly, interwoven with enemy-controlled areas, demonstrating a remarkable capacity for adaptation in guerrilla warfare. Supported by a robust agrarian economic base and the deep-rooted revolutionary traditions of Southern Vietnam's population, local production systems were organized in a diversified and self-reliant manner, encompassing agriculture, handicrafts, and internal trade.

Second, the mechanisms of resource mobilization and distribution implemented through the Economic–Financial Committees represented a strategic innovation of the southern revolution. By combining locally mobilized contributions, support from the socialist North, and international assistance, the liberated zones sustained a durable logistical capacity throughout fifteen years of warfare. These material resources constituted the principal foundation for maintaining strategic rear support and sustaining the southern battlefield over the long term.

Third, the organizational and leadership model of the on-the-spot rear base reflected a sophisticated integration of centralized political leadership with flexible, decentralized management. This system was deeply embedded within the population, maximizing community participation and fostering a high level of social consensus. As a result, it produced a comprehensive "resistance society" in which economic production, logistics, political mobilization, and military operations functioned in close coordination.

Taken together, the economy of the liberated zones in Southern Vietnam was not merely a supportive or auxiliary component of the anti-American resistance war but a strategic pillar of the overall revolutionary effort. The on-the-spot rear-base model demonstrated the organizational and economic governance capacity of the southern revolution under extraordinary conditions. The historical experiences of mobilizing internal resources, organizing production and distribution, and strengthening the relationship between revolutionary authority and the population offer valuable insights for contemporary national construction and defense, particularly in contexts where economic development is closely intertwined with national security in strategically sensitive regions.

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