

A close-up portrait of General Vo Nguyen Giap, looking slightly upwards and to the right. He has dark hair, a prominent mustache, and is wearing a dark, high-collared jacket. The background is a textured, warm-toned wall.

GIAP

The victor of Dien Bien Phu:
Part One of a two-part
profile by James Fox

After 30 years as commander of the Peoples Army of North Vietnam, General Vo Nguyen Giap has become a legend - as a military strategist and as a revolutionary hero. His defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 was a triumph for Giap's adaptation of

replaced the French, found no answer to the Giap doctrine, and after five years of frustrating stalemate began withdrawing their troops in 1969. But the legend is not as untarnished as it sometimes appears. Giap has had his disastrous defeats. His strategies have required human sacrifice on a scale that would be unacceptable to the West. And as a politician - which he is, above all - Giap has demonstrated a sly ability to resist his enemies, and a ruthless efficiency in purging the movement of its more dissident elements

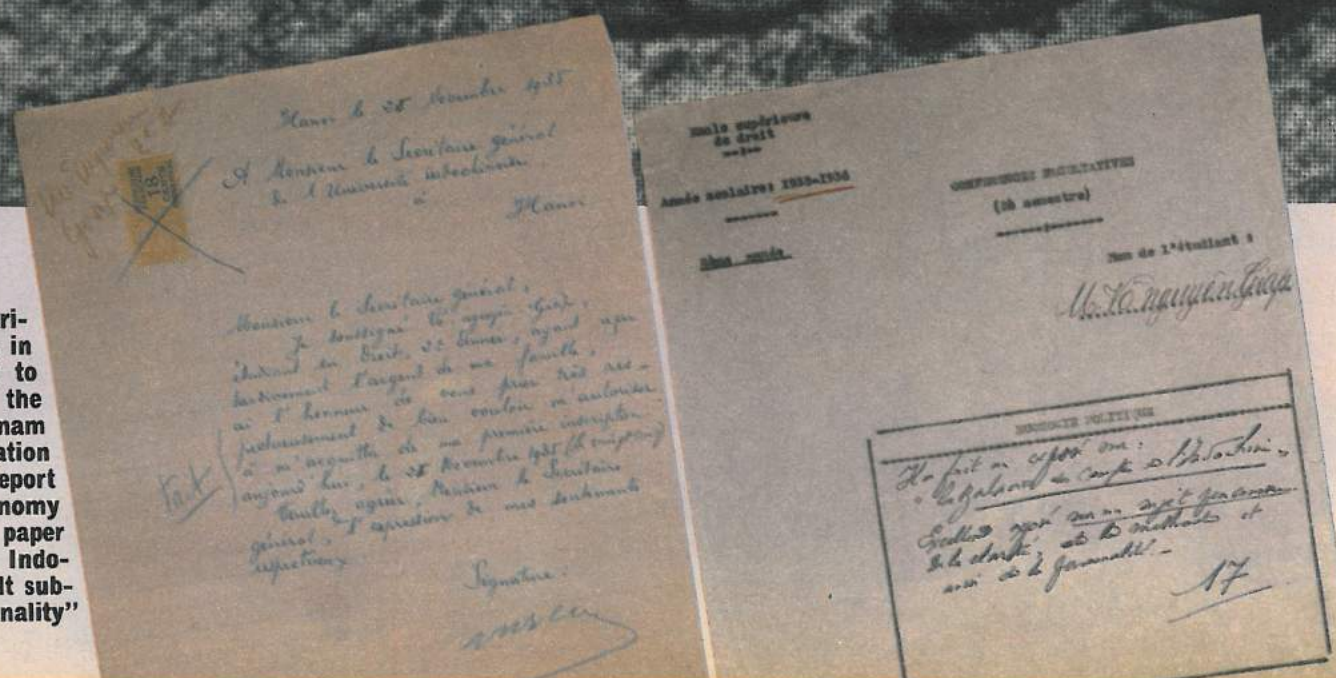


Already as a teenager at school in Hue, Giap (above) was on police files as an agitator. Left: graduation day for the Political Economy class at Hanoi University in 1937. Giap (fourth from left, second row down), passed out top

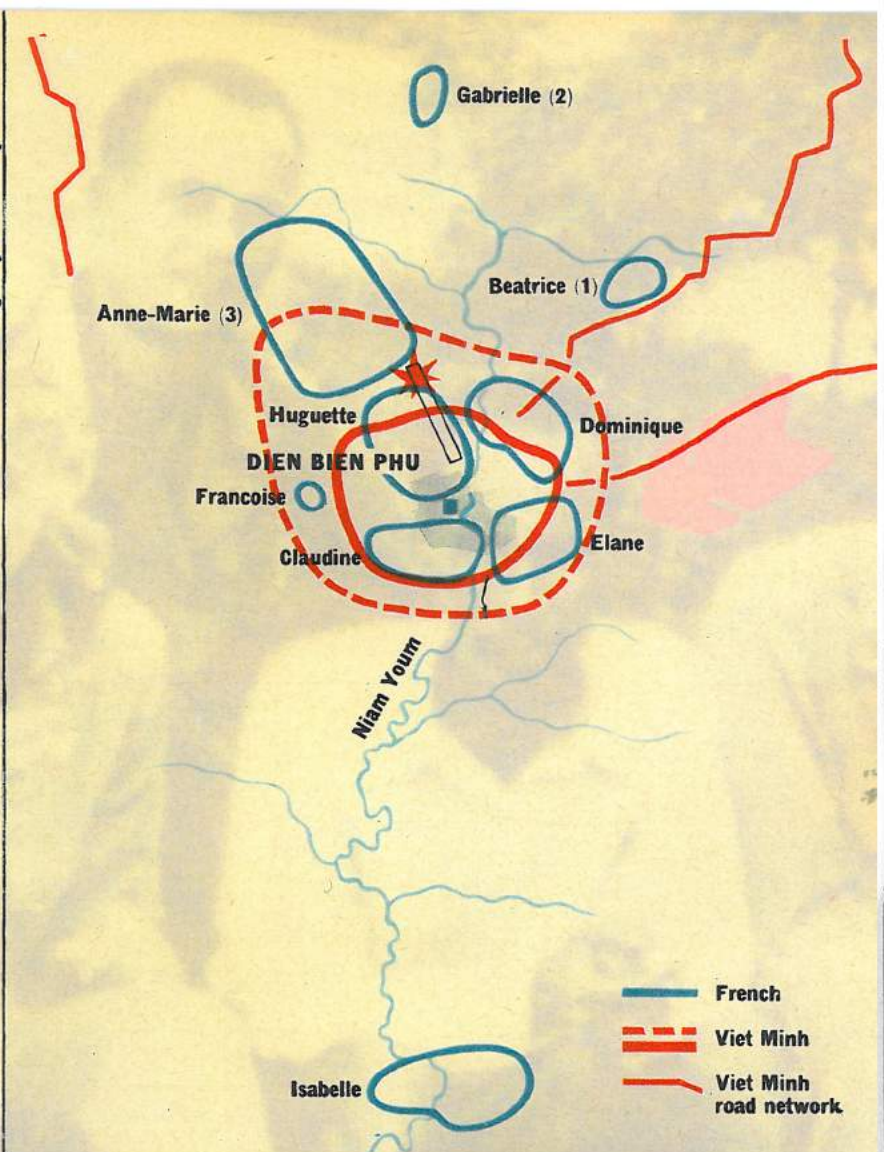
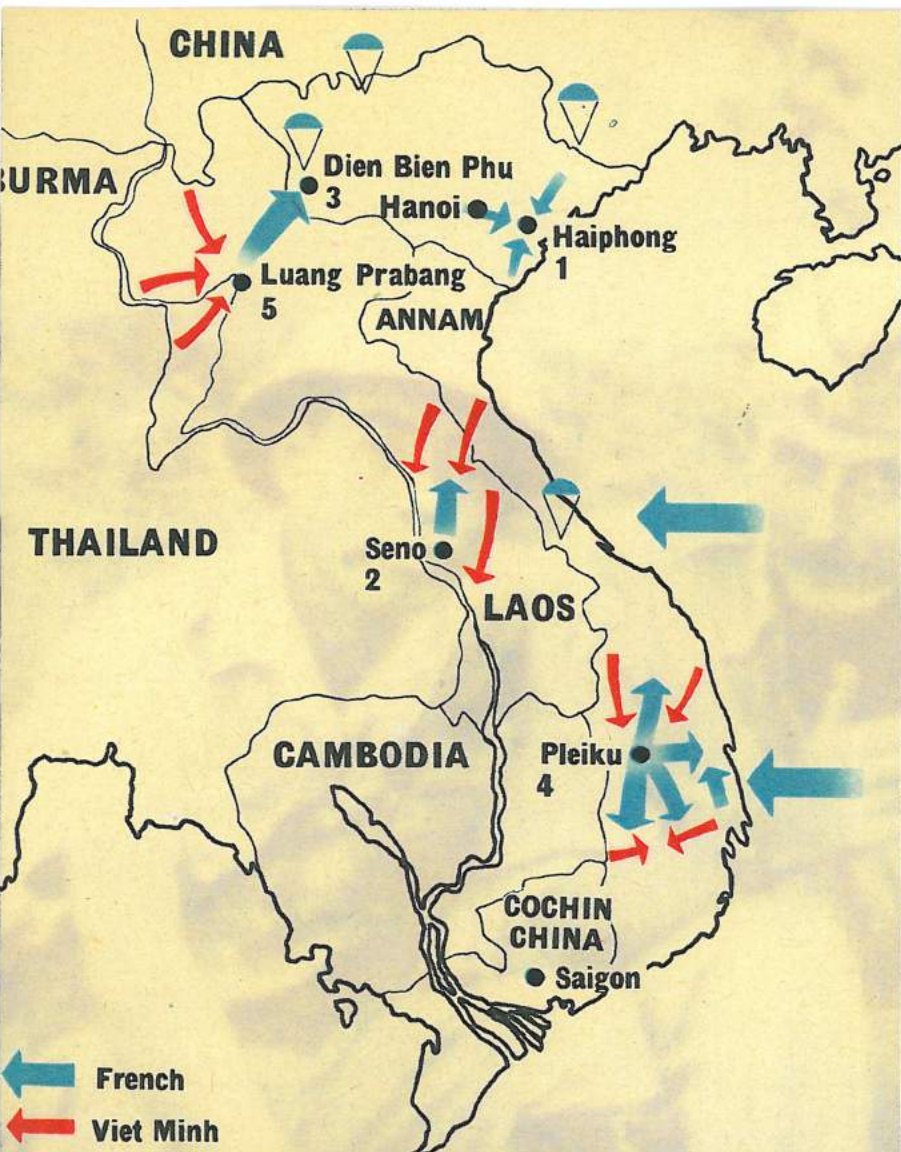




The ultimate irony: it was the Americans who helped Giap (arrowed left, in 1945) and Ho Chi Minh (right) to power. Roosevelt had agreed that the French should not return to Vietnam after the war. Right: Giap's application to the University of Hanoi, and his report from the head of the Political Economy Department: "He has done me a paper on 'The Balance of Payments in Indo-China': excellent expose on a difficult subject. Clarity, method and also personality"



Far left: "Military action without politics is like a tree without a root," said Ho Chi Minh (centre) with Giap in their stronghold in the Viet Bac before Dien Bien Phu. It was Ho Chi Minh who instructed Giap to form the first Armed Propaganda Group in 1944, which became the basis for the Peoples Army. Near left: Giap, in sandals, reviewing a victorious unit. "To their modern armaments," he says, "we oppose boundless heroism"



General de Lattre de Tassigny General Salan General Navarre

The 1953-54 campaign (above). Giap manages to disperse Navarre's forces into five areas, all unable to support the others, and traps the garrison of Dien Bien Phu, strangling it with trenches. Right: Legionnaires surrender. Below: Giap at the Dien Bien Phu battlefield



In a sombre flat in the Rue St Ambroise in Paris, surrounded by Chinoiserie and mahogany, lives Professor Gregoire Kherian, former tutor to the young Vo Nguyen Giap. He is now 86 years old. When the Japanese took over Hanoi in 1945, Kherian, who was head of the Political Economy department at the University, was given permission by a Japanese official to go up to his office and collect his papers. He took only one dossier on a pupil – that of Giap. "He was my favourite pupil," said Kherian; "he was brilliant and very brave."

"He would quote Danton in a loud and passionate voice"

Kherian still has that dossier, which includes such things as a paper written by Giap on "The balance of payments in Indo-China" ("Excellent exposé," noted Kherian, "on a difficult subject. Clarity, method, and also personality"); and applications, written by Giap, in the typical over-politeness of the French bureaucratic style, excusing himself for not inscribing sooner and explaining that his parents had only just scraped the money together. But Kherian's most intriguing recollection concerns the end of Giap's university career, when he was offered the chance to leave Vietnam altogether and go to France.

Giap had passed out top in Political Economy in 1938. "Every year we had a senior economist from Paris to pass the students," explained Kherian. "That year it was M. Gaeton Pirou of the Faculté de Droit in Paris. He was director of the Cabinet of Paul Doumer, the Prime Minister. He told me he was very impressed by Giap's work, and asked me about him. I said he had been in trouble with the authorities, that he was a hothead. Pirou said, 'We must take him out of the colonial environment. Bring him to Paris. He can study anything. We'll provide for him.' I told Giap, and the second day he came back and said he could not abandon his comrades and act like an egoist."

It was not a surprising decision for Giap himself, already deeply committed to anti-colonialist activities, but it was a disastrous one for the French, who were to face humiliating defeat in later years at the hands of



Giap the victor: he has been one of the century's outstanding strategists one General Vo Nguyen Giap.

"Military art without politics is like a tree without a root," said Ho Chi Minh, and everything in Giap's background contributed to the nourishment of those roots.

He was born on September 1, 1910 – a date worth recording here only because I happened by strange chance on Giap's birth certificate in Paris and can therefore put the academic world, which argues between 1911 and 1912, at ease. Giap's home was the village of An Xa, in Quang Binh province, about 60 miles north of Hue. It was a poor and infertile area, much like Quang Tri province to the south, where, in the Twenties, the peasants starved and where Giap's army is now dug in against American bombs. His father was a farm labourer, a lettered man and a nationalist, who was known as an organiser of political resistance against the French. Giap went to school at the Lycée in Hue, whose pupils, at various times, included Ho Chi Minh, Pham Van Dong (now Prime Minister), and that worst of all the leaders in the South, Ngo Dinh Diem.

In northern Annam there was growing rebellion in the late Twenties against the French authorities, and Giap, brought up in an atmosphere of nationalism, found himself in the mainstream of events and opinions. He read Ho Chi Minh's *Colonialism on Trial*, and found it a revelation: "To read a book denouncing colonialism for the first time inspired us with so much hatred and thrilled us," he said. Already he was a marked man in the files of the French Sureté. He demonstrated with French students at the Lycée and was

finally expelled for joining a 'quit school movement' in Hue. In 1927 he joined the Tan Viet, a loose party of progressives whose Left wing joined the Communist Party soon after.

The years 1930 and 1931 were known in Vietnam as the Red and White Terror. In the first year there were 83 strikes with 27,000 participants in the northern factories and southern plantations, where economic conditions were terrible; the membership of illegal unions rose from 6000 to 64,000 in those two years. French repression, especially in the town of Vinh – later the object of a savage attack by American bombers – was brutal. It is estimated that in those two years 10,000 Vietnamese were killed and 50,000 deported. In the province of Nghe An, where, ironically, Giap was to send his 325th Division to suppress a peasant revolt after the land reform measures of 1956, there was armed warfare against the legionnaires.

Giap organised a mass protest in Hue for which he was arrested and imprisoned in 1930, though his former tutor, M. Kherian, claims that he was sentenced for beating up a French student, not for leading a riot. Whichever way it was, Giap did not serve long in prison. He had become a protégé of Louis Marty, director of political affairs and general security services in Indo-China. It is possibly due to him that Giap was released, and it may explain the quietness of his existence for the next few years. He became a serious student, first at the Lycée Albert Sarraut in Hanoi, a school normally reserved for rich Vietnamese and French children – where Marty may have moved him – and then at the University, where he

became the star pupil of the Political Economy class under Kherian.

History was, and remains, Giap's passion. He went on to teach it after university at the Than Long (Rising Dragon) high school, where among his pupils were Le Duc Tho, many years later the chief negotiator for Hanoi at the Paris Peace conference; Nguyen Thanh Le, Hanoi's official spokesman in Paris; and other members of the delegation. "We liked him very much," said one of them. "He gave us a good presentation of French revolutionary history. He talked about the Commune, 1789, about the revolutionary personalities, Marat, Danton, Hoche. He would not tell us his views, but he would quote Danton in a loud and passionate voice."

Tran Van Tuyen, now a lawyer and a prominent member of the Opposition in Saigon, was a mathematics teacher at the school. "We became friends by lending books to each other," he said. "Giap had a wonderful library stacked with all sorts of political volumes. He was always a very hard worker and read enormously. I was very struck by his dynamism. Already his fascination for military strategy was obvious. His pet subject was, perhaps appropriately, the Napoleonic Wars, and to illustrate the fighting properly he always carried with him a map marking all the different movements and positions of the armies. He could explain why any battle was won or lost."

"The longer we wait, the greater will be their defeat"

His knowledge of history was to become a basic part of his equipment as a general. Early on in his career he grasped the concept of the "people's war", essentially a long-drawn-out engagement in which all the people, not just the military, are involved. Protracted war is an old Vietnamese trick which has thrown off many an invasion since the early Christian era. Provided the army can rely totally on assistance from the ordinary people in the villages, it will gradually sap the strength of the enemy, force him into defensive enclaves, and finally oblige him to withdraw his demoralised troops. What Giap was further able to appreciate – and what the Ameri- ➤➤

cans, for instance signally failed to realise was that this type of warfare, based on methods taken from a 13th-century handbook, was particularly effective in dealing with the technology of modern forms of combat.

"The longer we wait," said Giap, "the greater will be their defeat," and over 30 years of war, against the French and the Americans, that has been his maxim. The first 10 years – even before the cataclysmic defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 – showed that he was one of the great strategists of the 20th century. Still wearing his civilian clothes he scattered his guerrillas and wheeled his devisions around Tonkin, Annam and Laos, making the French army and its academy-trained officers look like amateurs.

With Ho Chi Minh: an immediate bond of friendship

Even the Americans – the most threatening invasion force in Vietnam's history – found themselves, after two years of Giap's strategy, bogged down; he wore them into a stalemate and into a gradual withdrawal. The list of Western generals who were to be foiled by Giap's form of war is an illustrious one: Valluy, de Lattre de Tassigny, Raoul Salan, Henri Navarre, Paul Harkins, Maxwell Taylor, William Westmoreland, Creighton Abrams. Some, like Taylor, were bemused. In 1964 he wrote: "The ability of the Vietcong continuously to rebuild their units and make good their losses is one of the mysteries of this guerrilla war."

But there have been disasters, catastrophic failures and criticism, some of it nearly fatal for Giap, on the way. His victories have often been at the cost of many thousands of his faithful infantrymen. And in his political life some ruthless Party purges have been associated with his name. Glimpses that are given of the Party hierarchy, rare after 1957, show that Giap has been through some turbulent times and some stern doctrinal debates. He has been criticised in public by other generals on occasion, and sometimes he has disappeared from public view with rumours of his impending arrest.

But one of the earliest blows he suffered was a personal one. By 1939



Ho Chi Minh and Giap visit their troops after the agreement at Geneva

Giap and Pham Van Dong – released from the terrible Poulo Condore prison by the amnesty of Leon Blum's Socialist government – were leading the Communist Party in Vietnam, which was dressed up as the Indo-Chinese Democratic Front. When the war began they both fled to China. Giap describes a poignant parting with his wife and baby daughter. He was never to see them again. She died in a French prison – Giap says from maltreatment – and her sister was guillotined. The daughter survives.

"Comrade Thai [his wife] with little Hong Anh in her arms, was waiting for me on the Co Ngu road," wrote Giap, whose style has never been remarkable for its emotional content. "In parting we expressed the hope to meet each other again in underground work when she was able to commit her child to someone's care. On May 4, 1940, Pham Van Dong and I took the train to Lao Cai and the End-of-the-Bridge Station. During the journey we had to get down twice when the train was searched. It was the rainy season. The rivers were swollen. At Lao Cai we crossed the Nam Ti river on a bamboo raft to the Chinese territory."

Ho Chi Minh had been living in Southern China, and they met him at Kunming, in Yunnan province. Giap had been carrying Ho's photograph in his pocket for some time, and had read every line he had sent to Vietnam. "It was already June, midsummer in Kunming," wrote Giap. "We walked leisurely by the Tsuy Hu bank and came across a thin, middle-aged man wearing a European suit and a soft felt hat. Compared with the famous photograph he looked live-

lier, more alert. He had let his beard grow. I found myself confronted with a man of shining simplicity. This was the first time I had set eyes on him, yet already we were conscious of deep bonds of friendship." Vu Anh, a prominent Vietnamese Marxist, described the meeting: "Ho and I had hired a sampan so that we could take them for a trip . . . Uncle said gaily, 'Young Dong hasn't changed much'. Then turning to Giap: 'He's still as fresh looking as a girl of twenty'." That Pham Van Dong had not changed was remarkable. To this day his health is seriously impaired by the years spent in the prison at Poulo Condore.

The greatest irony of all: the Americans drop supplies

In 1941, armed with Chinese guerrilla techniques and a small band of men, Giap moved back to Vietnam, to Pac Bo near the Chinese border, to carry out Ho's instructions for a political offensive against the French. He allied himself with Chu Van Tan, an ethnic minority leader, later a Minister in Hanoi, and together they built up district guerrilla forces using a mixture of intimidation and persuasion. Late in 1941 Giap had only 100 soldiers under his command, but by mid 1945 he had several thousand. Ho wavered back and forth between military action and proselytising, but it was the political offensive which proved in the end more important.

Several nationalist groups were competing for political power, but Giap's speedy organisation was the most effective. He did not rely entirely on force, though enemies and informers were robbed, beaten, tortured and sometimes assassinated. As Joseph Buttinger says in his book, *A Dragon Embattled*: "Success was achieved through a tactical strategy in which terror played a secondary role. The sacrifices the Vietminh were able to extract from the people during the Indo-Chinese war underline this vital political truth."

Ho Chi Minh believed that the liberation of Paris would turn the Japanese on the French, leaving a vacuum for his own forces, now known as the Vietminh, and his instructions to Giap were to create a unified command. The first unit of the Liberation Army – the Vietnam Propaganda and Liberation Unit – came into being in 1944. The structure of Giap's forces has since remained unchanged. At the top are the regular troops, of which this was the first unit. Below that come the regional forces – the guerrillas. Finally there are the self-defence militia, the people who continue to live in their villages but are armed and ready to give assistance on any occasion. It is the classic Maoist structure, in which the guerrillas supply the indispensable base, reserves, logistics and the economic organisation, while the self-defence militia concerns itself with maintaining production – mending roads, supplying rice and, now, shooting down the occasional American plane with an AK-47 rifle.

The guerrillas were provided with weapons by the Chinese. They made raids on French outposts and bartered with the Japanese. But the greatest irony of all was that the Americans, in the shape of the Office of Strategic Studies, forerunner of the CIA, were dropping arms and supplies to the Vietminh before 1945. Roosevelt's "anti-imperial stance" was simply an anti-French and anti-Japanese posture which envisaged the Chinese nationalists occupying Indo-China and making it safely pro-American after the war. Jean Saintenay, the most famous Frenchman of those times in Indo-China and Commissioner of the territory, who negotiated the treaty with Ho Chi Minh in 1946, told me in an interview recently: "It was the Americans who put Ho Chi Minh in power and Giap as well. Roosevelt had promised North Vietnam to Chiang Kai-shek. ➤➤

They pushed us wicked French imperialists aside. They didn't realise that the void could only be filled by Communism" – a liberty with history because it was the French who tried desperately to plug the void, failing finally at Dien Bien Phu. For the Vietminh, to whom arms were a major problem, the OSS was a godsend. Giap spoke of "particularly intimate relations with the U.S. which it is a pleasant duty to dwell on".

To celebrate the formation of his 34-man 'propaganda' team, Giap attacked two French posts on Christmas Eve, 1944, and massacred their garrisons. After the Japanese coup in March 1945, when they took over Hanoi and disarmed the French, the Vietminh acquired major territories. Six provinces between the Chinese border and Hanoi fell to the Vietminh, and Giap moved to within 60 miles of Hanoi.

Then events moved fast. The bomb dropped on Hiroshima ended Japanese control of Hanoi. Meanwhile Giap and Ho Chi Minh had robbed opposition parties of support by disguising the Communist Party as a broad-based national liberation party and claiming that they represented everybody; so when Giap marched into Hanoi with his troops in 1945 – in the wake of the Japanese – Ho was able to take control of the Government. It had been an incredible operation. While most of the other opposition groups – frightened of French repression – were waiting for V-J Day in China, Ho calculated that the few days between the Japanese retreat and the arrival of the allies would be crucial. He was right.

With remorseless efficiency, Giap removed the opposition

For the next year Ho set about establishing his hold. Giap, who had been Minister of the Interior, was dropped from the Government in 1946 to appease opposition parties and the Chinese Kuomintang, and to present the Allies with as broad a based government as possible. But he remained in control of the army.

In the January election of 1946, Giap was returned with 97 per cent. of the vote in the Nghe An province, a total only slightly less than that of Ho Chi Minh. And then, in March,



Giap (centre, next to North Vietnamese anti-aircraft gun) at Dien Bien Phu

Ho signed accords with the French. His reasons are unclear: it may have been because of the famine caused by floods in the Red River Delta; more probably it was because, as General Leclerc said when he brought in his army a few days later, "I would have come with or without your assent."

Whatever the reason, Giap defended the agreements with a brilliant speech in front of 100,000 people. "We have not chosen resistance of long duration because the international situation is not favourable to us. France has signed a treaty with China, America has joined the French clan. England has been with France for many months. Therefore we are nearly isolated. If we had resisted we would have had all the powers against us." The revolutionary movement was not strong enough, he said; there would have been needless sufferings with nothing gained. He compared the treaty to Brest Litovsk in 1918, which the Russians signed to stop the German invasion. To Jean Lacouture, the French journalist, Giap said: "If France is so shortsighted as to unleash a conflict, let it be known that we shall struggle

until death, without permitting ourselves to stop for any consideration of persons, or any destruction."

When General Leclerc, hero of the Free French Army's march across the Libyan desert, arrived in Haiphong, Giap greeted him with apparent warmth. "I am happy to salute in you a resistance fighter like myself," he said. Leclerc was not amused. But neither was Giap by the amount of heavy equipment Leclerc was landing at Haiphong, and he continued to prepare for the inevitability of war with the French. The Dalat conference in April, in which Giap excelled himself as a politician opposite Pierre Messmer – then a Socialist, now Pompidou's Right-wing Prime Minister – ended in what Giap described as "cordial disagreement". The French were clearly waiting their time before taking control of the government of Hanoi. Giap was seen weeping at the end of the conference. In May Ho went to Fontainebleau for more talks, leaving Giap as *de facto* head of the Government. If war was inevitable, then the Vietminh needed a strong Party, and Giap with remorseless efficiency set about removing opposition that

threatened its control. He executed hundreds of nationalists and Trotskyists, including a close friend of Ho Chi Minh, in a nationwide purge. The slaughter was nothing new in Vietnam, and the Communists did not have a monopoly over violence. It would undoubtedly have been used against the Vietminh by nationalists, Chinese or any of the opposition sects if they had gained a foothold. The French used assassination too. So did the Special Forces during Kennedy's "special war". Vietnam is the home of the policies of elimination.

92,000 Frenchmen died, and an unknown number of Vietnamese

Giap increased the army from 30,000 to 60,000 men between June and November 1946. Argument goes on about how the war actually started. But certainly Giap had difficulty restraining his army from making provocative attacks against the French, and he himself helped to whip up anti-colonialist fervour, on one occasion summoning everyone with a French title or decoration to the Grand Theatre for a burning of "the relics of colonialism". That year the whole Vietminh Government and army withdrew from Hanoi into the Viet Bac region, five provinces north of Hanoi, after heavy street battles with the French.

Seven years of carnage thus began, years in which 92,000 men of the French Expeditionary Corps were to die, along with an unknown number of Vietnamese. Giap waged guerrilla warfare for the first three years while he built up his army for the counter-offensive. It is interesting to see how little the Americans learned from the French mistakes, for the rules which Giap had laid down were the same for both. First harass the enemy, 'rotting' away his rear and reserves, forcing him to deploy stationary troops to defend bases and perimeters; at the same time attack his units with an overwhelming superiority of forces. If the enemy concentrated, the guerrillas would melt into the mountains and he would be left shooting into space. "Is the enemy strong?" wrote Giap. "One avoids him. Is he weak? One attacks him." The front would ➡

simply be where the guerillas were, often behind enemy lines. Finally: "To his modern armament one opposes boundless heroism."

"Anyone who gets involved in Indo-China needs his head examined"

The principle was very ably used against a disastrous expedition launched into the Viet Bac region by General Valluy in 1947 with the aim of destroying Giap's bases; it was one of the biggest operations ever mounted in Indo-China. With their massive armour and 30,000 men, the convoy got deep into Vietminh territory, along the famous Route 4. Unable to get off the roads, which got progressively worse, the convoy was harassed and ambushed by invisible guerrillas. Bridges were blown in front of them, villages burned, traps and mines laid, but Valluy's troops could never make contact. They got out of reach of their bases, ran out of food and fuel, and began an extraction operation which cost the lives of many paratroopers.

It was used five years later, in 1952, when Raoul Salan, head of the Expeditionary Force, having mounted an almost identical expedition into the Viet Bac with 30,000 men equipped with armour, got stranded 100 miles from his base. French planes were not even able to drop enough petrol to keep the expedition going. It never penetrated the Viet Bac and in the week it took to retreat to the Red River Delta Salan lost 1200 men. All their energies had been taken up simply defending themselves. And two years after that, when the ill-starred General Navarre thought about basing himself in Dien Bien Phu – a hollow bowl surrounded by difficult country with the intention of using it as an offensive base – he forgot the same lessons. The French, who rapidly lost control of Tonkin, were unable to keep their supply roads open, and their outlying garrisons were massacred.

Giap's principle was to use surprise and mobility, and to build his army while he fought, to launch the final climactic battle. In 1950, in a terrible battle along the Chinese border that was only overshadowed by Dien Bien Phu for sheer loss of lives, the French troops met Giap's



Giap and his fellow officers with Le Duan, Secretary General of the Party

regular divisions and Chinese 81mm. mortars for the first time. They were amazed at the sheer size of Giap's attacking forces. The death toll was terrible. In all the French lost 6000 killed, wounded or taken prisoner.

By 1950 Giap had formulated the strategy that was to prove fatal to any invading army. It was what he called the "contradiction of the aggressive colonial war". Had American strategists studied it they might have agreed with General McArthur who said: "Anybody who gets himself involved in a ground war in Indo-China needs his head examined."

French tanks "crushed heads, limbs, chests, by the dozen"

Unless the invading army fanned out, they could not occupy the country. But when they did deploy, occupying garrisons and mounting operations far away from their bases, "their broken up units became easy prey for our troops". There simply could never be enough invading troops to hold the scattered guerrilla forces down. But then if they mounted large mobile offensives against the Vietminh they would have to draw troops away from the occupied areas, and "the very object of the war of conquest could not be achieved".

Giap exploited the principle from 1950 until 1972. It is ideal for a protracted war in which the slaughter of the enemy is more important than capturing territory. Judging by the way most U.S. advisers misconstrued successive offensives, few of them

have managed to come to terms with Giap's theories. That is perhaps the permanent mental block that Kissinger spoke about when in May this year he said: "We know some of our Western forms have another connotation in Vietnam. Maybe we don't have enough imagination."

In 1950-54 both the French and the Vietminh battled savagely for the Red River Delta, the key to the defence of North Vietnam and its cities Haiphong and Hanoi, and Giap met his first major defeat. In 1951 he sacrificed more than 20,000 troops from three carefully-trained divisions to try to break through the French defences to reach both centres, and was severely beaten by French bombs, artillery and napalm. But even so, the guerrillas fighting in the Delta, according to Giap's principle, were holding down more than half the French expeditionary force, protecting their bases. They had been thrown on to the defensive behind the 'de Lattre Line' which aimed to protect the Delta from outside infiltration and which worked about as well as a sieve. Giap's guerrillas extracted manpower, taxes, food, information from the villagers. With their speed and mobility they could also hold down main force units. The de Lattre Line was the theme of Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* – in which the General's lookout posts were held at night by the Vietmin and recovered during the day by the French forces. The Red River Delta was so heavily 'infiltrated', it was known as the "Franco-Vietminh condominium".

Even when threatened, Giap could turn his principle to advantage. In 1952 Salan tried to break off the de Lattre Line and attack the Vietminh staging post at Hoa Binh. Giap

reacted to this threat by cutting all the approach roads, in a kind of dress rehearsal for Dien Bien Phu, and, at appalling cost to his own troops, mowed down the French as they made a humiliating withdrawal. In his book *Street Without Joy*, Bernard Fall describes the tank treads of the French, "crushing heads, limbs and chests by the dozen as they slowly moved, like chained elephants, in the little open space left in the post. But soon they too were submerged by the seemingly never-ending human wave, with scores of hands clawing at their turret hatches trying to pry them open; stuffing incendiary hand grenades into their cannon, firing Tommy-gun bursts into their driving slits, finally destroying them with point-blank bazooka bursts which lit up their hulls with the sizzling of white hot metal. The sweetish smell of searing flesh rose in the air. All five tank crews died to the last man, roasted alive in their vehicles."

If Giap was refused support, the village was destroyed

General de Lattre de Tassigny had suddenly returned to France before the battle, struck down by cancer. He had failed in Indo-China, and had he survived through the battle of Hoa Binh his reputation would surely have been finally destroyed at the hands of Giap.

Giap was reaching his most brilliant period; his touch was becoming sure. By 1953, after the Korean war, he was receiving massive aid from the Chinese – trucks, heavy artillery, anti-aircraft guns. The year before, he had already been sent 40,000 rifles and 4000 sub-machine guns. Giap added a heavy artillery division, equipped with the 105mm. guns which were to surprise the French at Dien Bien Phu. He had five divisions totalling 110,000 men. He was also building up his political support in the countryside – and could always hire anything up to 200,000 people to carry equipment and food for him.

The French in turn were receiving equipment from America. M. Laniel's Government had refused to finance the new offensive of General Navarre, who had succeeded de Lattre de Tassigny, until ➡

Eisenhower paid him 100 billion francs. But in Vietnam the people were awakened to the idea of independence, and the French Expeditionary Corps could expect little of the co-operation which was so vital for information and military political control. The search-and-destroy type operations which the French carried out were usually so brutal and mishandled that it was safer for anyone under 50 to join the Vietminh than stay in his village. And, if Giap was refused support in a village, one of his favourite ploys was to send in a sniper team to draw French fire, retreat and let the French destroy the village, with the resulting slaughter of inhabitants. On balance it was far better to co-operate with Giap, even if you happened to like the French.

To strike at the 'free zones', the French chose Dien Bien Phu

General Henri Navarre was to take the blame for the disaster of Dien Bien Phu. He arrived in 1953, with a reputation as a brilliant strategist, and proceeded to make a series of appalling mistakes. In France there was a marked lack of interest in the war. Navarre was expected simply not to dishonour his country, nor to endanger the Expeditionary Corps. It needed rebuilding, and Navarre's plan was to restrict its activity. But he wanted to hit Giap's free zones in the Delta, and he became preoccupied with keeping Giap out of Laos — on muddled and half-hearted orders from the French Government. For this purpose he chose the basin of Dien Bien Phu as an offensive 'springboard'. Soon after he arrived, Navarre tried to clear Highway One, the legendary 'street without joy', and failed. He evacuated Na San garrison the same month, and Lai Chau in November after his paratroopers had already landed in the Dien Bien Phu valley. That was another mistake — which, due to lack of men, perhaps he could not avoid. Giap immediately occupied Lai Chau, certain now that Navarre could be drawn into battle in the death trap of Dien Bien Phu if he, Giap, made a serious attempt to get to Laos. He started feverishly building a road from China via Lai Chau to Tuam Giao, his

operational base for Dien Bien Phu, for he had already decided to make his major battle there. It was a far-sighted, decisive move. Giap prayed the French would stay.

But there was one problem — Giap's free zones were threatened. The 'Navarre plan' envisaged smashing the guerrillas in a massive operation in the Red River Delta, and this put Giap in a dilemma. He wrote: "The enemy was concentrating its forces in the Red River Delta and launching attacks on our free zones. Now, had we to concentrate our forces to face the enemy, or to mobilise them for attacks in other directions? The problem was difficult. In concentrating our forces to fight the enemy in the Delta, we could extend our free zone; but here [in the Delta] the enemy was still strong and we could easily be decimated. On the other hand, in attacking in other directions with our main forces, we could exploit the vulnerable points of the enemy to annihilate the bulk of his forces; but our free zone would be threatened."

Five French battalions were cut off — Navarre was trapped

Giap decided to "press his contradiction". He knew that Navarre would try and block his way to Laos if he struck out in that direction, so he started a rapid movement across Tonkin, Central Annam and Laos to draw the French out of the Delta and make them disperse (see map on page 54) into five concentrations which were then, in turn, broken up again. First was the Red River Delta (1 on the map) where Giap left guerrilla units to assassinate, cut communication lines, strike at border posts, and cut Route 5 between Hanoi and Haiphong. That tied down five French battalions. In December 1953 the Vietminh moved in five days from Vinh on the coast, along mountain paths into Laos where they attacked the French at Thaket and turned on Seno — the French air force base — to which they laid siege for five days (2). Two more battalions were flown by Navarre from the Delta and Saigon, but by now Giap controlled the Bolovens plateau in Laos. Next he foiled Navarre's Operation Atlante, a landing on the

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coast of southern Annam which Navarre hoped would destroy the Vietminh in the southern highlands. Once more Giap had removed his regular units and brought them to reinforce Dien Bien Phu (3), leaving only companies of guerrillas to harass the French who never managed to dislodge them. Meanwhile he launched heavy attacks in the Central highlands, taking Kontum and moving on Pleiku (4). That held down some of the fiercest fighting groups in the French armoury. Finally, with incredible speed he moved his 316 Division into Laos, and moved towards Luang Prabang (5). Navarre sent five battalions to block his way and Giap simply turned around and sped back to Dien Bien Phu to reinforce the garrison. The French were therefore spread out in five different points of concentration — each unable to reinforce the other. The pressure was off the Delta, and the garrison at Dien Bien Phu was trapped.

Giap said later that if the French were beaten they were beaten by themselves. Navarre had been deceived by his experience at Na San the year before when Giap sent in his human assault waves, and the French,

although outnumbered, mowed them down in droves. Navarre wanted a set-piece battle at Dien Bien Phu where his troops could do the same thing. But in fact he had been lucky to get the garrison out of Na San, and the passion with which the Vietminh sacrificed themselves there, and at Bien Hoa, should have been a warning to him. By the time the French knew they would have to defend themselves it all looked like a disastrous mistake. It was realised too late that when the April rains came the centre of the valley turned into a swamp, and that there were no local materials to build defences. The air force commander had told Navarre that it was impossible to supply the camp, 200 miles from Hanoi, but Navarre had ignored him. The commander was able to drop only 2000 tons of construction material, leaving the camp 34,000 tons short. In the end it looked as if the French would be buried alive in their own flimsy earthworks and in the deep mud. Navarre thought that even if Giap did have artillery — which despite all his reconnaissance he did not detect until just before the battle started — the French counter-battery and air force would knock it out

rapidly; that Giap did not know how to use anti-aircraft guns; and that his logistics could only sustain a battle for four days. Navarre was unaware, too, that if Dien Bien Phu was lost the war in Indo-China would be over.

Giap's guns fired straight down, like Napoleonic cannons

But Giap had been preparing, for three months, one of the most extraordinary logistical operations of history. An army of hundreds of thousands of porters streamed from China to the valley, carrying food and ammunition on reinforced bicycles, or on their heads, marching 20 miles a day, 50 at night. Guns were dragged inch by inch up cliff-faces into casemates overlooking the valley. Convoys of trucks rolled under miles of camouflage or at night. The French aerial reconnaissance photographs showed nothing.

The head of the French artillery, Colonel Charles Piroth, refused extra artillery pieces, thinking he could pinpoint Giap's guns when they started firing. But he never saw them, and when the barrage opened, smashing his artillery to pieces, he committed suicide with a grenade.

Giap's guns did not fire in a trajectory. They fired straight down into the unprotected camp like Napoleonic cannons, smashing into the airfield which Navarre depended on, putting air support quickly out of the picture. From that moment fighter bombers could only operate above the battlefield for ten minutes before returning to Hanoi.

Still it was Giap's most daring gamble. "In fact," he wrote later, "the Dien Bien Phu fortified entrenched camp had many strong points which had given our army new problems of tactics to solve before we could annihilate the enemy." He knew that a massive rush on the camp might destroy half his army and demoralise the rest. "We came to the conclusion that we could not secure success if we struck swiftly. In consequence we resolutely chose the other tactics. To strike surely and advance surely." Giap's forces slowly strangled the French garrison with a system of trenches dug at great speed, burrowing under the barbed wire, which brought the Vietminh to within a few

yards of each French position. The endless sound of picks and shovels as the trenches moved closer demoralised the defenders. The battle started on March 13. By April 12 the French were reduced to an area of one square mile, and by May 6 to a space the size of two football pitches. The carnage was terrible. Jules Roy, author of *Dien Bien Phu*, describes the only surgeon on the French side: "Grauwinfelt like crying. The terrible sight of broken bodies and blown off heads filled him with rage. To reach the shelter where he snatched a few hours' rest, he had to step over piles of amputated limbs. With his friend Gindrey he operated, sawed bones, unwound yards of intestines, stitched chest wounds and got rid of the hundreds of corpses which had overflowed from the morgue and were covering the helicopter landing ground, the roofs of the messes and the dormitories. Trucks carried them away in macabre loads, buzzing with huge purple flies, to graves dug by bulldozers."

One day before the Geneva Conference, the French surrender

In a rare moment of candour, Giap admits that the iron discipline of the Peoples Army was breaking under the terrible slaughter, half-way through the battle. He wrote that "negative Rightist thoughts cropped up to the detriment of the carrying out of the task", and: "We opened in the heart of the battle an intensive and extensive struggle against Rightist passivity." French radio intelligence picked up messages from unit commanders to their superiors telling them that their units were refusing to obey orders. By the middle of April Giap had lost 10,000 men in the battle for the outer hills, and had to call for young and untrained reserves from his staging posts in Tonkin. Giap had urged them to "overcome fear and pain" at the start of the battle. To have succeeded in carrying off the "ideological struggle" which made the Vietminh army fight for another month, and lose another 13,000 men, was an amazing feat of politics and leadership. But it succeeded. The French surrendered one day before the Geneva Conference began.

Next week: the war against America

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