

Russell Stetler, ed., The Military Art of People's War,
Selected Writings of General Vo Nguyen Giap,
New York, Monthly Review Press, 1970, 332 pp.

General Vo Nguyen Giap's fame was established in 1954 with the victory of the Vietminh over the French at Dien Bien Phu. The centrality of that event for contemporary Vietnamese history is suggested by the title of the final article in this selection of Giap's writings: "Their Dien Bien Phu Will Come." It is an interview given by Giap two years ago, and concerned the nature of the current United States intervention in Vietnam. Asked whether the U. S. had lost the war, Giap answered: "they've recognized that themselves. To prove their military defeat, I'll go back to their political defeat, which is the basis of the whole thing." Giap's analysis was that military victory over the U. S. as over the French would be based not in the superiority or inferiority of men and matériel, but in the superiority of inferiority of political action and organization, which are the basis of the strategy of people's war. Thus, in his writings Giap describes military operations and the political context which gives them meaning.

Giap has written several detailed analyses of the Vietminh military campaigns against the French. However, the more controversial aspects of those campaigns are not discussed. The implications for the Vietminh leaders who sought to avoid a conflict through reliance on the

good faith of the French in the crucial negotiations of 1946 are not mentioned. Giap himself, as minister of the interior after August, 1945, participated in conferences such as that at Dalat. He later saw the negotiations as part of France's "delaying strategem for preparing the war they intended to continue." Late in 1946 the French launched their attack on the Vietnamese in Haiphong and Hanoi initiating the conflict.

When the Vietminh were able to move from defensive to offensive warfare, the U. S. stepped in to support the sagging French military capacity with American money and arms, and the proposal of "developing the puppet forces on a large scale to replace European and African troops" who were to be a reserve for mobile offensives. This new theme in 1950 of "Vietnamization" aimed at adding more troops and giving the Vietnamese people the impression that the war was being fought by the French in their interest. Giap only mentions the important unsuccessful and successful campaigns of 1951. Early in 1951 Giap sought to overwhelm the French forces on the Red River Delta surrounding Hanoi. The campaign failed with heavy losses for the Vietminh. But, Giap is equally silent about the important strategic success later that year - the Hoa Binh campaign. The French sought to carry the war into the Vietminh strongholds in the highland regions but were destroyed in numerous operations in which French superiority in mobility was reduced and Vietminh mobile superiority was maximized. The French applied the strategy developed by the U. S. - the 'meat-grinder' - and used by it

both in Korea and Vietnam. The destruction of the enemy's manpower capacity through the massive application of modern fire-power, especially from the air, has been ^{the} siren of defeat for the French and for the Americans. It was the French and the Americans who suffered the unacceptable casualties. With enemy forces pursuing their strategies in the highlands where they lacked the advantage, Vietminh military and political units had freedom of movement in the populous lowlands spared from major military action.

Following the 1953 truce in Korea, U. S. aid to the French increased until it reached 80% of the war's cost. To destroy the Vietminh supply routes in Laos in preparation for a 'final' major campaign, the French established a huge base in the valley of Dien Bien Phu. Giap explains that his response was to reinforce with Vietminh the allied Pathet Lao forces. This Vietminh-Pathet Lao force beginning in December 1953 stormed the enemy positions in middle Laos, gained control over Route 9 (along which the South Vietnamese army unsuccessfully advanced earlier ~~th~~1971), and liberated the strategic Bolovens Highland of southern Laos. Giap explains in detail ~~th~~"Dien Bien Phu" the organization and planning of this victory. An important element according to Giap was the countering of the enemy's monopoly of air-power. Tactically, the anti-aircraft capacity of the Vietminh was a crucial element in nullifying the French air support. Strategically, air power was defeated by determination and organization: "American interventionists sent more bombers and transport planes to support the Dien Bien Phu base.

The enemy bombers were very active; they ceaselessly bombed our positions, dropped napalm bombs to burn down the vegetation on the heights surrounding Dien Bien Phu, and bombed points that they took for our artillery bases. Day and night they shelled our supply lines, dropped blockbusters on the roads, showered the roads with delayed-action and "butterfly" bombs, in an endeavor to cut our supply lines. These desperate efforts did not achieve the desired results. They could not check the flow of hundreds of thousands of voluntary workers, pack horses, and transport cars carrying food and ammunition to the front." Very little has changed over two decades.

Giap insists that "stress should be laid on the considerable contribution made by the land-reform policy to the victories of the winter-spring campaign, particularly on the Dien Bien Phu battlefield." Repeatedly, the central thread in Giap's explanation of people's war is the political framework; military operations are conducted on the basis of political decisions. Giap in the "Origins of the People's Army" attributes the early success of the Vietminh military activities to Ho Chi Minh's insistence on rejecting sectarian politics and organizing a broad national united front, the Vietminh. Thus, the Vietminh worked to win the support of villages: "village authorities sided with the revolution, became members of organizations of national salvation and in whatever they did, Vietminh committees were consulted before hand." The Vietminh were asked to settle land disputes, register property and marriages, and when the district governors set up militia

posts in each village against them these were turned into centers of revolutionary activities while appearing to operate as part of the government's apparatus. Dual power was created according to Giap because "we firmly upheld local people's power, overthrew straw men, eliminated traitors."

But, this success in the villages was rooted in the fundamental political issue: "the problem of land is of decisive importance." People's war "is aimed at overthrowing imperialism and feudalism, reconquering independence for the nation and giving land back to the tillers." The restoration of land to the peasants involved not only the struggle against the feudal system which imposed on the peasants payments to those assigned as masters over their lands by the political system, but also against imperialism which ruled through the feudal landholders and in return reinforced their mastery over the peasantry.

Giap's proposals concerning the anti-feudal struggle do not seem to have always been accepted. He suggests that a more sectarian line tended to predominate; a line not committed to Giap's revolutionary watchword - "land to the tillers" - but to collectivization instead. The ultimate result of that line threaten the very existence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam following the Geneva Conference of 1954. Giap played a crucial role in rectifying the collectivism which had been imposed by Truong Chinh who was removed as secretary general of the communist party in late 1956. Thus, Giap notes (with disapproval since it limited peasant commitment) that in the late 1940's this line "postponed

the application of its watchwords on the agrarian revolution, limiting its program to the reduction of land rents and interest rates, which enabled us to neutralize the wavering elements among the landlord class and to rally around us the most patriotic of them." Then, in the early 1950's, "when agrarian reform had become an urgent necessity, our Party applied itself to making a differentiation within the heart of the landlord class by providing its political line for different treatment for each type of landlord according to the latter's political attitude on the principles of liquidation of the regime of feudal appropriation of land."

Land monopoly was terminated by the division of the lands to those who worked them. But, Giap's attitude toward the contrasting approaches is clear! "in the early years of the resistance a certain underestimation of the importance of the peasant question hindered us from giving all the necessary attention to the worker-peasant alliance. This error was subsequently put right, especially from the moment when the Party decided, by means of accomplishing agrarian reform, to make the peasants the real masters of the countryside." When the "land to the tillers" principle was violated by the introduction of collectivization after 1954 Ho and Giap sympathetically accepted the peasant demands to end the mastery of the bureaucrats and to re-affirm private farm property and cooperatives.

Giap emphasized in 1966 the peasant basis of the new struggle in South Vietnam: "The South Vietnamese peasantry, more than ten million strong, is the largest revolutionary force.... This revolutionary upsurge is the essence of an insurrectionary movement of the mass of peasants, in which they carry out successive uprisings, to take power at the base and regain the right to land ownership." The land which had been gained by the peasants in South Vietnam during the war against the French was restored to the landlords under Diem to the extent of two-thirds. Heavy taxation, military and labor conscription, judicial terror contributed to the landlords' mastery. Giap describes the post-1954 return of feudalism in the south which was similar to the original establishment of feudalism: former landlords and new "bureaucratic" landlords working with them have used "their power to seize land from the peasants by their control of the administrative system." Capping this exploitation, according to Giap's analysis, are the "bureaucratic comprador bourgeoisie" - the high-ranking government and military officials - who use their political power "to lay hold of key positions in the economy and seize control over all the important branches," to have privileged access to American foreign aid and local extortion. The conflict in South Vietnam for Giap is rooted in the peasantry's desire to "defend the people's power and the tillers' right to land ownership brought about by the revolution." Although much discussed by American experts, the analysis of the agrarian revolution by Giap is more specific and concrete than their generalizations.

The concluding collections concerning the American escalation of the conflict in Vietnam are invaluable for understanding the current situation in Vietnam. The success of people's war in Vietnam has meant that Americans can not remain uninformed concerning its military and especially its political foundations; Giap's writings are the best introduction to that subject available. Russell Stetler's introduction is a masterful contribution in its own right for those who wish a grasp of Giap's thought and of the Vietnamese revolution. In it Stetler distills the vast knowledge he has acquired of Vietnamese affairs through his researches in Europe and Asia.