

General Vo Nguyen Giap: Death of a Vietnamese Hero

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Vietnam's General Vo Nguyen Giap was popularly known as the "Red Napoleon". A pioneer of modern guerrilla warfare, his role in the Vietnamese armed forces' stellar victories over the colonial militaries of Japan, France and the United States inspired millions in the global South in their own anti-colonial struggles. A tribute.

In the early days of October news came from Vietnam of the death of General Vo Nguyen Giap, at the age of 102. Second in reverence only to Ho Chi Minh, General Giap came to symbolise the success of what has come to be more recently defined as asymmetrical warfare. At the outset of the modern Vietnam independence struggle, the Viet Minh numbered in the hundreds and increased from small-scale guerrilla units to more conventional large-scale battle formations, defeating in turn the French colonial occupation forces and the mighty United States (US) and its neocolonial puppets.

Socialist Rebel

Giap, like many other revolutionary leaders, came from a comfortable landowning family. His father, functioning as a low-level bureaucrat under French colonial administration, was imprisoned in 1919 for nationalist agitation, where he died as did his sister. He attended the same Lycée as Ho Chi Minh, and Ngo Dinh Diem, the latter going on to become president of South Vietnam until he lost US support and was assassinated in 1963. Giap was expelled from the Lycée for nationalist agitation, followed by his arrest in 1930, spending a bit more than a year in prison. He took a BA in Law at the University of Hanoi, but failed the certificate exam due to his time-consuming political activity. His inability to practise law led him to a position as a history teacher, where he became familiar with Napoleon and T E Lawrence. He later came to be known by his adversaries as the "Red Napoleon".

Prior to leaving for China in 1940 he founded a socialist youth newspaper. He returned to the Viet Bac, the northern six provinces of Vietnam inhabited mostly by minority people, in 1942. When I visited that area in 1973 the commanding generals all expressed pride in it being a secure area whenever the Viet Minh needed an impenetrable refuge. (On the lighter side one of them leaned over at dinner and asked if I wanted the address in Hanoi of Ho Chi Minh's girlfriend, who was still alive. He was kicked under the table by one of his comrades.) While Giap no doubt gained from his experience in observing the development of the Chinese revolution on the ground, the adversarial challenges he was to face, on any scale, were, no doubt,

significantly greater than that faced by Mao. This is no diminution of the latter.

On Christmas day of 1944 Giap was charged with the first military assault on a Vichy French outpost, which he captured. Four months later the Viet Minh force numbered 5,000. Two hundred of them were selected for training and arming by the US special forces in the attempt to drive out the Japanese forces who controlled the country with the cooperation of Vichy France. In August 1945 Giap led his forces into Hanoi, tactically retreating back to the Viet Bac the following year when French forces reoccupied the country. It took another eight years of guerrilla level fighting before the decisive battle of Dien Bien Phu took place. The French fortified the outpost hoping to sever Viet Minh supply lines, believing in their technological superiority.

Nemesis of Empire

Giap developed what I would call the noose strategy, of digging tunnels around the French forces and surrounding them with units fortified by Soviet tanks and artillery. Ironically, the first artillery salvo fired by Giap's forces was a 105 mm gun which had been captured by North Korean forces during the Korean war, sent by rail across China and installed in the perimeter of Dien Bien Phu. This gun had been kept covered in satin in 1971 in the basement of the war museum in Hanoi. French forces surrendered, and after the US refused to provide critical support, the French announced their withdrawal. Richard Nixon, who was then vice president of the US urged the use of tactical nuclear weapons in support of the French, a proposal which President Eisenhower rejected.

The US incrementally came to replace the French in Vietnam through their domino principle – if Vietnam “falls” to the communists it would be followed by similar liberation wars in South-East Asia and ultimately threaten Australia and New Zealand. In 1968 Vietnam's Communist Party concluded that a major military offensive would spark a nationwide rebellion. The date was set for the Tet holiday period. There has been some suggestion that Giap was less than enthusiastic, as he left for medical treatment in Hungary, returning to Vietnam after the offensive began. As minister of defence, Giap nonetheless coordinated the attack with horrendous casualties on both sides.

Tet did for the US what Dien Bien Phu did for the French; it precipitated the decision to withdraw. Giap had achieved the political goal. While the anticipated nationwide rebellion failed to materialise, the morale in the south Vietnamese military began to crumble. Five years later, in 1973, I visited the Thac An river which was the front dividing the southern and northern armies, and one officer commented that the commander of the southern forces had informally communicated to the National Liberation Front command that if he received an order to open fire across the river he would fire to miss, as none of his men wanted to be the last soldiers to die in the war. The South Vietnamese government survived for another seven years after Tet before Giap's tanks broke into the presidential palace in Saigon, capturing the then president, “Big” Minh. Vietnam was again reunited as one country. During this period the Soviet Union provided material military support and the Chinese sent in 3,20,000 troops.

Revered and Respected

In 1980, Giap retired as minister of defence, followed two years later by resigning from the politburo of the communist party. He stayed on as deputy prime minister and central committee member until 1991. Many western commentators have suggested that he was marginalised in the post-1975 period, but have failed to consider that age and health may have been the basis of his withdrawal.

At the age of 99 Giap expressed support for an expert committee report which expressed severe reservation on a major bauxite extraction proposal as damaging to the ecology in the central highlands of Vietnam as well as concern over national security, asking who would invest the \$1 billion required for infrastructure modification. A few years earlier I was asked to explore with the Aluminium Company of Canada (ALCAN) if they would be willing to pick up the tab, but was informed that Australia was on top of their list followed by India and, maybe half a century later, Vietnam.

Vo Nguyen Giap was a complex man in complex times, but as we can see from the thousands who rushed to his home on the announcement of his death, he remained a leader to be cherished and revered. Having visited with his father-in-law on two visits to Hanoi, I can testify to how he was respected by both the general population as well as within his family.

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