

Vo Nguyen Giap (1911-2013)

Military leader of Vietnamese anti-colonial struggle

Patrick Martin
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Hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese lined the streets of Hanoi Sunday for the concluding ceremonies in the two-day state funeral of Vo Nguyen Giap, the general who commanded Vietnamese forces in wars against Japan, France, the United States and China.

Press accounts describe people as weeping openly and holding aloft pictures of Giap, the legendary commander who accepted the surrender of French forces at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, putting an end to a century of colonial rule, and who was still at the head of the Vietnamese military when the last Americans fled Saigon by helicopter in 1975.

Giap died October 4 at the age of 102, the last survivor among the revolutionary nationalists who spearheaded the most important anti-colonial struggle of the 20th century. The liberation wars of the Vietnamese people extended over four decades, from 1940 through 1975, and culminated in the greatest defeat in the history of American imperialism.

That Vo Nguyen Giap was an extraordinary military leader is beyond question. However, recognition of his perseverance and courage in the face of brutal and powerful imperialist adversaries should not blind one to the consequences of the Stalinist program to which he and the Vietnamese Communist Party, under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh, adhered.

Born in 1911 in the village of An Xa in Quang Bing province, just north of what would become the partition line (the so-called De-Militarized Zone), Giap was heir to a family tradition of anti-colonialism. His father had taken part in the last major rebellion against the imposition of French rule, in 1888. Giap joined an anti-colonial group at the age of 14, and was jailed for three years at the age of 18 for political activity.

Like so many of his generation, Giap was attracted by the example of the Russian Revolution, joining the Indochinese Communist Party led by Ho Chi Minh. He apparently developed personal ties to Ho as well: in the late 1930s, the two men married sisters. Both women were murdered by French imperialism during World War II, one shot by firing squad, the other dying in a Hanoi prison. Giap later remarried and had four children.

The ICP shared many of the characteristics of the Communist Party in neighboring China. It won important support in the urban working class and the intelligentsia, but fell victim to the Stalinist degeneration of the Communist International, adopting the same program of collaboration with the national capitalist class, in the name of national unity against imperialism, that had led to disaster in China in 1926-27.

In Vietnam, however, the native capitalist class was even weaker than in China. French colonial rule gave the bourgeoisie no room to develop, relying instead on the court of the puppet emperor Bao Dai and a narrow stratum of French-educated Vietnamese officials.

Throughout much of the 1930s, the ICP held back from an open struggle against French colonialism, adhering to the Popular Front policy of the Comintern, imposed by Stalin after the coming to power of Hitler in

Germany in 1933. In the name of unity in the struggle against Nazism—whose victory was itself the product of the false policies of the Stalinists—the working class was subordinated to an alliance with the “democratic” imperialist powers, including France, the colonial master of Indochina.

The eruption of the Pacific phase of the Second World War in 1941-42 turned the political situation in Vietnam upside down. Japanese forces invaded Indochina after Pearl Harbor, overthrowing the French colonial regime. The ICP began to organize armed resistance to the new colonial power. Giap was given the main responsibility for this effort, heading the League for the Independence of Vietnam, or Viet Minh.

From a few dozen men fighting in the forested mountains along the Vietnam-China border, the Viet Minh developed into a significant military force of more than 5,000. When Japan surrendered in August 1945, Viet Minh fighters under ICP leadership marched into Hanoi and declared the country's independence.

The war against French colonialism

What followed was one of the most monumental betrayals in the infamous history of Stalinism. The wartime agreements between Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill called for the restoration of the French colonial authorities in Indochina. French troops returned to Vietnam, with the acquiescence of Ho Chi Minh and the ICP leadership.

China, then under the rule of the right-wing Kuomintang, sent 200,000 troops to occupy the northern half of Vietnam, disarming the Japanese forces and displacing the Viet Minh regime in Hanoi. But as civil war erupted in China, the Kuomintang forces withdrew and the French regained control of their former colony.

Throughout 1945-46, the ICP suppressed opposition to the reestablishment of colonial rule, claiming that Vietnam's independence could only be secured through a negotiated agreement with the French authorities.

The ICP waged a vicious campaign against the Vietnamese Trotskyists, who had considerable support in the working class, particularly in Saigon, and who opposed the Stalinist capitulation to French colonialism. The leader of the Trotskyists, Ta Thu Thau, was murdered at the orders of Ho. Giap, as the commander of the Viet Minh, played a major role in carrying out the violent repression.

No amount of Stalinist conciliation could convince French imperialism to agree to Vietnamese independence, however. In November 1946, French gunboats opened fire on the port city of Haiphong, killing 6,000

people in one day. The next month, full-scale war broke out. The French Foreign Legion drove the Viet Minh out of the cities, and guerrilla warfare began that would last nearly eight years.

As in the case of China, the turn to guerrilla warfare was part of a change in the class axis of the ICP, from a party that had originated in the working class to one which mobilized the rural peasant masses on the basis of a bourgeois program—national independence, land redistribution, the overthrow of landlordism and the monarchy.

Giap was the military commander of the anti-colonial forces, who entrenched themselves in the rural areas and waged an increasingly effective fight against the French occupiers. This culminated in the spring of 1954 in the 55-day siege that forced the surrender of the French garrison at Dien Bien Phu, an isolated fortress established in an effort to cut the Viet Minh's supply lines.

Dien Bien Phu was one of the most remarkable military operations of the 20th century. Under Giap's direction, tens of thousands of peasant farmers carried dismantled artillery pieces into the mountains surrounding the fortress, where the guns were reassembled and targeted on the French encampment.

The logistical effort to sustain the siege was astonishing. One historian wrote: "Reinforced bicycles were loaded with hundreds of pounds of supplies and pushed up muddy tracks. Giap would later recall that it would take 21 kilograms of rice for the porters for each kilogram of the staple that arrived to feed soldiers laying siege to the French."

Viet Minh shelling eventually forced the closure of the airfield, and the French could obtain provisions only by parachute drop. French officials appealed for a tactical nuclear strike to rescue the garrison, but US President Eisenhower and British Prime Minister Churchill refused. The garrison surrendered May 7, 1954 after suffering 7,000 casualties, with another 11,000 taken prisoner. The next day the French government announced it would withdraw from Indochina.

Dien Bien Phu was not only a landmark in the history of Vietnam, but in the anticolonial struggle worldwide. For the first time, insurgents of an oppressed country of the "third world" had decisively defeated the army of a major imperialist power. Coming only five years after the victory of the Chinese Revolution in 1949, Dien Bien Phu made it impossible to maintain colonial suppression in the parts of Asia and Africa where the European powers were still clinging on.

American imperialism replaces France

Once again, however, Stalinism came to the rescue of imperialism. At the Geneva Conference of 1954, opening only days before the fall of Dien Bien Phu, the Soviet and Chinese regimes agreed to a settlement that deprived the Vietnamese of half the victory they had won. The country was partitioned along the 17th parallel. While the Viet Minh came to power in Hanoi, a US-backed puppet regime was established in the south under Ngo Dinh Diem, with its capital in Saigon.

Within five years, guerrilla warfare had broken out again, as peasants under the leadership of the National Liberation Front, established by Vietminh cadres from the south, took up arms against the Diem regime. In 1961, the Kennedy administration dispatched thousands of US advisers in South Vietnam. Two years later, the US backed the overthrow and murder of Diem and his replacement by an even more corrupt clique of military officers.

In early 1965, with the Saigon regime visibly crumbling, US President Lyndon Johnson ordered a massive military escalation. At its high point, the United States deployed more than half a million soldiers in Vietnam, employing devastating firepower including napalm, saturation bombing

and the spraying of dioxin (Agent Orange)—everything short of nuclear weapons. American imperialism was responsible for the slaughter of an estimated two to three million people in the course of 14 years of war (1961-1975).

Giap was in overall charge of the Vietnamese military operations throughout this period, as commander of the army and defense minister. He was reputedly the principal architect of what the US military called the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the supply lines through the jungles of Laos that brought weapons, ammunition and recruits from north to south.

Giap's specific role in several key episodes in the American phase of the war remains murky. He was reportedly opposed to the Tet Offensive, or at least to the decision to stand and fight against the American counterattacks in cities like Hue, which produced devastating casualties for the liberation forces. He was held responsible for a subsequent failed Vietnamese offensive in 1972, in which direct assaults on US positions were thrown back with heavy losses, and he stepped down as head of field operations.

Van Tien Dung succeeded him as commander of the Vietnam People's Army, but Giap remained as defense minister, overseeing the 1975 offensive, after the US withdrawal, that shattered the Saigon regime.

The *New York Times* obituary was compelled to pay tribute to Giap's military reputation, but exuded the hatred of American imperialism for an adversary it could not defeat. The obituary observed, "his critics said that his victories had been rooted in a profligate disregard for the lives of his soldiers," citing the notorious comment by Gen. William C. Westmoreland, who commanded American forces in Vietnam from 1964 until 1968: "Any American commander who took the same vast losses as General Giap would not have lasted three weeks."

The embittered stupidity of these remarks is characteristic of the whole American enterprise in Vietnam, to say nothing of the subsequent criminal operations of US imperialism in countless other countries. It was not Giap who slaughtered millions of Vietnamese—that near-genocide was perpetrated by the American military, the most reactionary and bloodstained force on the planet.

Stalinism and nationalism

Giap resigned as defense minister in 1980 and was removed from the Politburo in 1982, reportedly after disagreements over the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in 1979, which he had opposed. Following the Vietnamese ouster of the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia, China, Pol Pot's principal ally and defender, waged a border war against Vietnam—the last military campaign in Giap's long career—in which Chinese attacks were thrown back with heavy losses.

Giap played a central role in the defeat of French and American imperialism in some of the most protracted and bloody struggles in history. But the regime which he helped establish was not a socialist one. Instead of opening up a new road for the workers and peasants whose virtually unlimited self-sacrifice ensured the revolutionary victory, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam proved to be a blind alley.

Postwar Vietnam has joined in the scramble to offer up its population as cheap labor for US, European and Asian transnational corporations. At the same time, the regime has made its peace with Washington, cooperating militarily and establishing a tacit alliance with American imperialism against China.

The final three decades of Giap's life were spent in comfortable retirement, in which his public comments consistently supported the right-wing policies being pursued by the Vietnamese Stalinist regime. There is no record that he ever voiced opposition to Vietnam's following the

Chinese model in restoring capitalist property relations while retaining the police-state dictatorship controlled by the Communist Party.

Visits to Hanoi by foreign dignitaries during this period frequently included a ceremonial meeting with Giap, in which the retired general always spoke as an anti-colonial nationalist, not a socialist or internationalist. On the 50th anniversary of the French surrender of Dien Bien Phu, Giap told foreign journalists, "If a nation is determined to stand up, it is very strong. We are very proud that Vietnam was the first colony that could stand up and gain independence on its own."

In a lengthy interview in 1999 for the US Public Broadcasting System series, "People's Century," Giap elaborated this nationalist outlook. Acknowledging the devastating impact of the collapse of the Soviet Union on the Vietnamese economy, he said, "I was asked what I thought of Perestroika, so I answered that I agreed with the change and thought it was necessary in political relations. But Perestroika is a Russian word, made for the Russians. Here we do things the Vietnamese way."

He continued, "We learn from the experience, both good and bad, of capitalism. But, we have our own Vietnamese idea on things. I'd like to add that we are still for independence, that we still follow the path shown us by Ho Chi Minh, the path of independence and Socialism. I'm still a Socialist but what is Socialism? It's independence and unity for the country. It's the freedom and well-being of the people who live there. And, it's peace and friendship between all men."

Here there is not a hint of Marxism, not a word about the irreconcilable class antagonisms within capitalist society, or the division of the world between oppressed nations and imperialism. However brilliant and courageous as a military leader, Vo Nguyen Giap remained politically to the end of his days within the orbit of Stalinism.



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