

# General Vo Nguyen Giap

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## INTRODUCTION

General Vo Nguyen Giap, born 25 August 1911, is a Vietnamese military leader whose precise planning and execution of guerilla tactics as well as conventional strategies led to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam's (Viet Minh) victory over the French at Dien Bien Phu in the First Indochina War (1946-1954), followed by North Vietnam's over South Vietnam and the United States in the Vietnam War (1960-1975).<sup>1</sup> Promoted to General at the age of 37, he was the principal commander for both wars and was responsible for other significant operations such as the Tet Offensive in 1968, the Easter Offensive in 1972, and the final Ho Chin Minh Campaign in 1975.<sup>2</sup>

His prominent military leadership in the Viet Minh and Vietnam People's Army (PAVN) was complemented by consummate political leadership, as seen through his roles over the years as a journalist, interior minister in Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh government and Politburo member of the Workers' Party. He also held positions of Minister of National Defense and Deputy Prime Minister after the Vietnam War.

## EARLY LIFE

Born in An Xa village, Giap was a member of the large Vo family. His father, Mr Vo Quang Nghiem, was a prestigious teacher and medical practitioner in the region, teaching Han scripts and the national language of Vietnam.<sup>3</sup> He was also a passionate anti-colonialist scholar.<sup>4</sup>

Giap attended the Hue national high school, similar to the late president Ho Chi Minh.<sup>5</sup> His classmates include famous revolutionists Nguyen Khoa Van, Nguyen Thuc Hao and Nguyen Chi Dieu.<sup>6</sup> Expelled as a suspected leader of a student strike, he later on joined the Tan Viet Party to campaign for it to join the Communist Party. During this period he also worked as a subeditor for Tieng Dan newspaper, in which he made public articles on Marxism-Leninism, making him a target of the colonial government.<sup>7</sup>

Giap and other revolutionaries were arrested and sent to jail, but did not serve the full sentence due to a campaign for political prisoners to be released.<sup>8</sup> He later obtained a degree in law and political economy in Hanoi

University and taught history in Hanoi for a few years.<sup>9</sup> In 1939, he married Nguyen Thi Quang Thai, a fellow socialist, who bore him a daughter. However, the French outlawed communism that same year and he had to flee to China, leaving Thai and their daughter behind. Thai and Giap's sister were arrested and died shortly after.<sup>10</sup> From then to 1945, Giap aided the opposition against the Japanese Army that invaded China and Vietnam.<sup>11</sup>

### FIRST INDOCHINA WAR

After Japan's defeat in the Second World War (WWII), Vietnam's unpredictable future led to both Britain and China removing themselves from the country. The French renewed control of their old colony despite Ho Chi Minh setting up the Viet Minh, with Giap acting as the Minister of the Interior.<sup>12</sup> France did not acknowledge the new provisional government, and conflict soon followed.<sup>13</sup> Initially Giap faced many issues due to the French forces being better equipped, however the French army was spread out, giving Giap the chance to reconstruct his army. Also, the victory of Communist Mao Zedong in China provided the Viet Minh with a safe haven for training and recuperation.<sup>14</sup> Giap gained a reputation as a master of guerrilla warfare.<sup>15</sup>

As with most commanders, Giap made mistakes as well. In 1951, he made a tactical blunder

when he launched a conventional counteroffensive on fortified French positions along the Chinese border, and lost 20,000 men in the Red River Delta.<sup>16</sup> This setback taught him many valuable lessons which he put into play later on.

The key victory of the Viet Minh came after seven years of war, when General Henri Navarre, the French commander in Vietnam, decided to create a base at Dien Bien Phu to provoke Giap into launching a traditional large scale attack.<sup>17</sup> Dien Bien Phu was a town in Northwest Vietnam and it had an isolated airbase that the Japanese used in WWII.<sup>18</sup> This was a key position because it was near the Vietnam/Laos border and would block the Viet Minh from going to neighboring camps in Laos.<sup>19</sup> Although the Laos government was under French control, their authority was attenuated as the Viet Minh had the support of the Laotian people.<sup>20</sup>

Unfortunately for the French, Giap was able to gain the higher ground and concentrate enough troops to outnumber his adversaries five-to-one.<sup>21</sup> He also blocked off French resupply with 105mm artillery and anti-aircraft guns from the Chinese.<sup>22</sup> A full-scale attack ensued on 13 March 1954 and lasted for 56 days. After heavy fighting, Giap eventually decided to encircle Dien Bien Phu with a outer trench, following which other trenches and tunnels

were dug towards the center, allowing Viet Minh troops to move closer to Dien Bien Phu while remaining under cover.<sup>23</sup> On 7 May 1954 the base fell, and the French announced their withdrawal from Vietnam the next day.<sup>24</sup>

The defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 marked the end of the influence of France in Vietnam.<sup>25</sup> It was a huge victory for Giap and he rose in fame as a military commander skilled both in guerrilla and conventional warfare.

### THE VIETNAM WAR

Vo Nguyen Giap remain commander-in-chief of the Viet Minh for the entire duration of the Vietnam War.<sup>26</sup> He and Ho Chi Minh argued when a war erupted between South Vietnam and North Vietnam and United States (US) troops came to protect Saigon. Giap wanted to use the same guerrilla tactics against them but Ho Chi Minh wanted to use conventional methods.<sup>27</sup> Giap argued that the US and South Vietnamese were better prepared and conventional methods would not work well.<sup>28</sup>

The National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (NLF) was created in December 1960 when South Vietnam President Ngo Dinh Diem did not hold elections for a united government as agreed in the Geneva meeting in 1954.<sup>29</sup> The NLF worked in small

groups of three to ten soldiers and used classic guerrilla tactics—attacking enemies from surprise then retreating back into the jungle.<sup>30</sup>

However, Giap also believed that “in a time of war, you have to take your lead from the enemy. You have to know your enemy well. When your enemy changes his strategy or tactics, you have to do the same.”<sup>31</sup> The Tet Offensive was one such case where the North Vietnamese changed tactics and resorted to conventional warfare against South Vietnam and US.<sup>32</sup> On 31 January 1968, 70,000 NLF soldiers attacked more than 100 targets, one of which was the capital of South Vietnam, Saigon.<sup>33</sup> The results were mixed as the NLF lost 37,000 soldiers while the US lost 2,500.<sup>34</sup> However, as Giap mentioned in an interview, “the offensive was three things at the same time: military, political, and diplomatic.”<sup>35</sup> With continued military, political and diplomatic victories, North Vietnam aimed to erode America’s willingness to continue the war.<sup>36</sup>

In March 1972, with the aid of better weaponry from the Soviet Union including tanks and long ranged artillery, Giap approved a massive three pronged conventional assault in the South called the Easter Offensive.<sup>37</sup> While the attack was unsuccessful, the Communist position continued to improve due to Richard Nixon’s

policy of Vietnamization, which was to slowly withdraw US troops while still supporting South Vietnam and Saigon.<sup>38</sup> North Vietnam finally overran South Vietnam and captured Saigon on 30 April 1975, leading to the establishment of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

After the formation of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, Giap assumed the positions of Minister of Defense and Deputy Premier.<sup>39</sup> He stayed in both positions until 1980 and 1982 respectively.<sup>40</sup> During his retirement wrote many military texts including *People’s Army* and *The Military Art of a People’s War*, providing insights of his military aptitude and strategies.<sup>41</sup> He is currently the longest living person in Vietnam’s military history and is recognized as the most outstanding military leader after the late President Ho Chi Minh.<sup>42</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Vo Nguyen Giap is an outstanding leader who faced difficulties with courage and determination, offering brilliant guerrilla warfare as well as conventional strategies. This led him to high leadership positions in the military and he became a key person in the struggle against France in 1954 and South Vietnam in 1975. Although there were costly miscalculations in 1968 and 1972, it did not deter him from continuing and winning the war. He firmly believes in Socialism, and

has said that “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.”<sup>43</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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