

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article3168>



Obituary:

General Vo Nguyen Giap (1911-2013): Military hero, revolutionary intellectual, environmentalist

- Features -

Publication date: Sunday 3 November 2013

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Few people from the 20th century can really claim to have changed history. One of them without a doubt was General Vo Nguyen Giap, who led the Vietnamese people to defeat the French and US empires.

Giap died on October 4, aged 102.

While mainly remembered as a military leader, Giap was also one of Vietnam's most significant political leaders, a revolutionary intellectual, an environmentalist and a campaigner for progressive change within his own country.

According to Vietnamese law, state funerals are only given to former heads of state or government. Giap never attained any of these titles. Defence minister for long periods, deputy prime minister was highest official post he rose to. Heads of the armed forces don't get them.

Yet there was never a chance the ruling Communist Party wouldn't break the rules for Giap, regarded to be a national treasure. The very suggestion of it over the last few years provoked outrage. The mass outpouring for his funeral demonstrated the enormous esteem in which he was held.

Born Vo Giap in the north-central province of Quang Binh in 1911, the surname Vo in Vietnamese refers, coincidentally, to a fighter, a warrior. It was a most appropriate name for someone who would go on to defeat the most powerful imperial states on Earth. But one of Giap's nicknames was Brother Van – where "Van" means literature. "Vo" and "Van" represented the two sides of the character of this very widely read, intellectual military officer.

Just one example of how these two aspects of his character were combined was his skill with languages. When he was building the people's army in the 1940s in remote mountain regions, he learnt four languages of ethnic minority peoples who would be fighters in that army. He even wrote poems in one of them.

Giap came from a nationalist family. His maternal grandfather had joined the Can Vuong Resistance against the French, and his father had also joined uprisings against the French in the 1880s. His father was arrested in 1919, when Giap was eight, and died in prison. One of his older sisters was arrested soon after, and died soon after being released due to prison conditions. These two events, in addition to the later arrest of his first wife and fellow revolutionary, Nguyen Thi Quang Thai, in the 1940s, who also died in prison, left indelible marks of justified hatred for the colonial oppressor on the young Giap. His first daughter, Hong Anh, told Cecil B. Currey, Giap's biographer, that "he carries in his soul wounds that even time cannot heal".

Giap was already an organiser of a student movement at his high school, Quoc Hoc High in Hue, for which he was expelled and returned to his village. There he joined the Tan Viet party, which introduced him to communist ideas – in 1926 reading Ho Chi Minh's Colonialism on Trial, which would change his life forever. Following further arrests and a jail sentence in 1930, Giap moved to Hanoi, where he joined the Communist Party of Vietnam in Hanoi in 1931. In Hanoi, he studied law, and also worked as a high school history and French teacher.

Giap briefly left for China in May 1940 when France outlawed the party (it was during this time his first wife was arrested and died), but on his return with Ho Chi Minh in 1941, they set up the precursor to the famous Viet Minh, first to fight the war-time occupation by Japan, in collaboration with the fascist Vichy French government, and later the

French when they returned.

After driving out the Japanese, Ho Chi Minh proclaimed the Democratic Republic of Vietnam on September 2 1945. However, the revolutionaries were well aware that the French planned to return, and in the meantime a mind-boggling assortment of Chinese Kuomintang, British and retreating Japanese troops were crawling over Vietnam like vultures. Giap founded the Vietnamese People's Army on December 2, 1944, consisting of 31 men and three women.

By the time of the independence proclamation, the VPA had some 5000 troops. Some of their weapons had come from the US Office of Strategic Services (OSS, the precursor to the CIA) to help fight the Japanese, but as history showed, the Vietnamese revolutionaries' pledge from the outset to not be used by any colonial or foreign power was meant seriously.

Giap and 'Peoples' War': Defeating France

Most obituaries have dealt heavily with Giap's role in leading the Vietnamese people's war against French colonialism, and particularly the smashing victory at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 – one of his history's more significant battles, one that actually changed something major, as a small and poor country brought about a devastating defeat to a major imperialist power, an extraordinary encouragement to hundreds of millions of other peoples throughout the colonial world trying to throw off the colonial oppressor. It is above all due to this victory that Giap, along with Ho, acquired mythic status among the world's peoples.

"All citizens are soldiers. All villages and wards are fortresses, and our entire country is a vast battlefield on which the enemy is besieged, attacked and defeated", Giap proclaimed. This is not the place to discuss Giap's military strategy, which would require another article, or articles. In essence, however, Giap was one of the 20th century's leading practitioners and theoreticians of "people's war", involving a vast array of tactics, ranging from the simplest guerilla operation, or even just providing water to troops, right up to main front battles and much in between, that aimed to involve ordinary people at every level in the fight to defeat the oppressor, who had overwhelming superiority in advanced weaponry.

Much has been written about the final battle of Dien Bien Phu, a strategic French military post in the mountainous north-west of Vietnam, so rather than repeat, this article will quote an excellent description by Jack Smith in the October 12 Liberation News:

"Giap figured out what to do – one of the most audacious maneuvers in modern military history. ... Giap had artillery but he kept it a secret until the right moment. His plan required 50,000 troops, thousands of support forces, 24 howitzers, and anti-aircraft guns, ammunition and supplies for an army. Each howitzer weighed between 3 and 7 tons, depending on the type Giap used.

The problem was how to get the howitzers up the mountains without being detected despite roadless, very difficult terrain. He decided that large teams of porters would push and haul each piece up the back side of the mountains, facing away from the base. Once there, they would tunnel and drag the howitzers to the forward slopes on the other side facing the enemy down below, and position them to cause maximum damage to various parts of the sprawling base. It was an incredible accomplishment.

The French – who numbered about 13,000 – discovered the Viet Minh had heavy weapons on March 14, 1954,

when the first shot came crashing down upon them. After two weeks of this bombardment, Giap sent in the troops. It was a tough fight, including in trenches. On May 7, Giap sent 25,000 Viet Minh on a final assault on the remainder of the garrison-and it was over."

Land reform disaster and rectification

Following the supposedly temporary division of Vietnam into north and south at the Geneva Conference in 1954, the ruling Communist Party government in the north set about carrying through its social revolution. However, the nature and speed of the social transformation were important issues where differences naturally arose, especially in such an underdeveloped country.

Meanwhile, the very division of the country also led to different views on how much stress to put on aiding the liberation movement in the south and pushing reunification, before getting too bogged down in transformation in half a country.

Nevertheless, as the peasant masses had been the major base of the resistance to the French, the elementary democratic issue of carrying through the party's land reform program was not something that could wait, and the party set to the task soon after victory. In late 1954, Ho Chi Minh announced a "land to the tiller" campaign.

However, as the depth of the sheer class hatred of the poorest peasants, after centuries of oppression, was unleashed, an element of the ruling party, led by general-secretary Truong Trinh (whose name means "Long March"), rode this wave in an opportunist fashion. By most accounts, this "poor-peasant" ultra-radicalism occurred with the encouragement of Chinese advisors then in Vietnam, who did not fully understand the Vietnamese reality.

Though the land reform began modestly as planned, by its second stage it had turned into a fiasco, with poor peasants encouraged to denounce large peasants and even middle peasants and village teachers as bourgeois class enemies, many of who were unjustly stripped of land, in conflict with explicit party guidelines. Ho Chi Minh also made clear that while the land of the landlords was to be redistributed, no retribution was to be dished out to those who had supported the anti-French struggle, and they were not to be left destitute themselves. Yet many land reform committees did just that, and that was the least of it; several thousand people lost their lives before the campaign could be brought to an end.

Ho Chi Minh and General Giap continually denounced the excesses and demanded the carnage come to an end. Yet their voices had little effect on the combination of unleashed raw class hatred on the ground and the opportunism mixed with ideological obsession that was playing with this fire. Certainly, the idea of either Ho or Giap being "dictators" was shown to be demonstrably false.

But then when those masses on the receiving end began to organize themselves, their voices could become effective. Aggrieved peasants began making their way to Hanoi to gather outside the party Central Committee to demand redress. These even included Vietminh cadres from the French war, who had also been targeted. There were even peasant uprisings in some provinces against the crazed "land reform" committees.

Finally, the protesting peasants were all invited to a major sports ground in Hanoi and addressed by Giap, who admitted that grave errors had been made, and the campaign was brought to heel, with a rectification campaign restoring land to those who had lost it unjustly. Ho Chi Minh also chose Giap to go and campaign around the country to calm the situation. The campaign had distributed land to 10 million peasants, but the price had been heavy, and

had bogged down the party at a time when the right-wing dictatorship of Diem in the south was stepping up its violent attacks on the Vietminh cadres there.

By 1959, it was clear that the northern cadres had to step in and deliver military aid to the struggle in the south, especially as the US was already sending massive aid and advisors to Diem. The pressure of the south led to the party leadership choosing a leading southern cadre, Le Duan, to replace Truong Trinh, dumped due to the land reform fiasco, as party general-secretary. It is widely believed that that Giap was expected to have been given that position, and that this was the beginning of the famous rivalry between these two leaders. Whatever the case, it did become clear that the two had a number of political differences in the following years.

War in the south: Disputes over strategy

As the Sino-Soviet split widened in the early 1960s, while concurrently, the US intervention into the war in the south grew deeper, differences emerged over these related issues.

In 1963, the party decided it needed to step up support to the military struggle in the south, while at the same time, resolving to remain neutral and remain friends with both major Communist-ruled states.

However, several cadres, led by Hoang Minh Chinh, adopted a pro-Soviet position. Their view was that the division of Vietnam could only be resolved by diplomatic and not military means, in line with the Kremlin's philosophy of "peaceful coexistence." While China had also been advising caution, the widening of the split led it to verbally play the "revolutionary" card against Moscow's "revisionism", so by 1963 it was supporting a greater military role for Hanoi in the south.

While both Giap and Le Duan recognised the necessity of military intervention given the reality on the ground, different conceptions emerged over the nature of armed struggle and its relation to political struggle, including a semi-public debate between Giap and General Nguyen Chi Thanh, supported by Le Duan, in the party's theoretical journals. All agreed in principle that the struggle would involve a mixture of main force battles, guerilla warfare, winning people politically, and diplomatic struggle, but the weight of each was sharply contested.

While Le Duan and Nguyen Chi Thanh believed the strategy of "big battles" involving large "main force" units should take primacy, Giap stressed instead the primacy of guerilla war, in the form of "prolonged people's war". This latter conception meant that military struggle had to go hand in hand with gathering popular support, and was done in a way to gather further support, at no stage going beyond where the people were at.

Both conceptions had the ultimate aim of taking the largely rural-based struggle to the cities via popular insurrection, but Giap's conception once again put greater stress on coordinating with the popular masses in the cities, a precondition to moving onto this stage.

To undermine his opponents, Le Duan adopted a verbally pro-Beijing position. In practice, however, this was largely just a device to use to denounce his opponents and rivals as "revisionists", thus falsely putting Giap and his co-thinkers in the same bag as the pro-Moscow "negotiations only" wing of the party.

In reality, however, Le Duan had little in common with Maoism other than "fighting revisionists." Beijing, for its own reasons, in fact advocated a prolonged people's war strategy, in common with Giap. However, unlike Giap, Beijing wanted it prolonged as long as possible, had no interest in moving onto the insurrection stage, still less in winning

over people in the cities, and above all had adopted a verbally ultra-left position of opposing the Vietnamese entering into any negotiations with the US. Beijing's position was thus concerned with limiting Vietnam's options in emerging as a strong power independent of Beijing, and its agreement with Giap on people's war was thus largely coincidental.

In fact, to focus on "main force" battles, Le Duan ultimately would have a greater need for the Soviets' more advanced weapons, and he did later turn to them; at this point, however, as the Soviets only pushed negotiations and no war, for Le Duan (and for Giap) this could only mean capitulation. Moreover, the specific "main force" battles strategy put forward by Le Duan's camp was suggestive of the Maoist "surround the cities" strategy: a rural-based army would ultimately take over cities, but little importance was given to winning the urban working classes over. Ultimately, even though Beijing opposed main force battles which Le Duan advocated, and even though Le Duan was not opposed to negotiations whereas Beijing was, the impression that both were adopting a "hard" position, even if in very different ways, was a useful ploy for fighting "revisionists".

Thus the Sino-Soviet dispute intersected with inter-Vietnamese differences in rather indirect ways. Ultimately, neither Giap nor Le Duan (nor many in the CPV) had much faith in either Moscow or Beijing, and for both the issue was always what was good, in their view, for Vietnam's struggle, never about being someone else's tool.

Tet Offensive

Most commentary on Giap's death claims he was the master of the famous Tet Offensive of 1968. In that offensive, North Vietnamese and southern National Liberation Front troops launched massive simultaneous surprise attacks, involving some 80,000 troops, on five cities, 36 provincial capitals, 64 district capitals and 25 airports throughout Vietnam. Some of the most spectacular attacks were on the central city of Hue and on Saigon itself.

Massive US counter-attacks by air killed thousands of NLF troops, indeed it is widely regarded as an enormous military set-back and body blow to the southern guerilla forces in particular. Some units lost the overwhelming majority of their troops. However, the Tet Offensive is also regarded to be the turning point in the war due to the political impact it had on the home front in the US, where it helped provoke widespread opposition and helped fuel a feeling of vulnerability in the US and its armed forces.

While this political impact is undeniable – and the CPV's strategy was always political as well as military – Western propaganda has demonised Giap as a "ruthless" military chief who was unmoved by how many of his troops were slaughtered "just to achieve his political ends". Bart Jones, writing in the October 4 Washington Post, asserted that "In three decades of combat, he is said to have had more than a million of his soldiers killed."

Of course, the self-serving hypocritical nature of such talk, from those supporting the side that was doing this ruthless slaughtering of millions of Vietnamese, via the most massive carpet bombing in history which dwarfed the entire tonnage of bombs dropped in all theatres of World War II, including history's longest ever chemical war with Agent Orange, in a country far away from American shores that they had no business being in, is so stunning that it requires no analysis but only contempt from intelligent people.

Beyond that, however, recent research suggests the charge against Giap in relation to Tet is in fact unwarranted. While defence minister, Giap had only one vote within a special 5-member Politburo "war sub-committee" consisting of himself, Le Duan, Le Duc Tho, Nguyen Chi Thanh and Pham Hung.

Based on "a number of Vietnamese histories, documents, and sources have become available" in recent years, author Merle Pribbenow shows that as Tet 1968 approached, Giap and many leaders, including Ho Chi Minh, had great reservations about the idea of the offensive, as they believed the conditions were not ready for popular

uprisings in the cities (Pribbenow, *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 2008, vol. 3, issue 2, pp. 1–33, for this and the paragraphs below regarding Tet).

As background, in June 1966, the Politburo war subcommittee met with the Central Military Party Committee and outlined a plan to win a decisive victory. It consisted of “main force” units attacking the enemy on four main battlefields, to be combined with attacks and insurrections in three main cities.

While Giáp agreed with fighting “big battles” as one part of an overall strategy, he stressed that “the attacks on the cities should start with small military attacks and only gradually build up to the ‘insurrection’ stage in certain specific areas and cities, once communist military forces had attained local superiority in those areas”.

In January 1967, the Central Committee approved Resolution 13, which called for “an all-out effort ... to win a decisive victory in a relatively short period of time”, by inflicting heavy casualties on US forces, destroying a major portion of the South Vietnamese army, before inciting a “general offensive–general insurrection” in the cities – there was no consideration given to launching urban insurrections before some decisive military defeats of the enemy, understanding this would mean the revolutionary forces would be smashed by the US military.

The resolution made clear that this should occur “at end of a gradual, step-by-step process: “In coordination with the political struggle, [we must] build up our strength, gradually and systematically gain control in the cities, weaken the enemy’s controls, intensify our movement in the cities, and create conditions to enable us to advance toward launching a general offensive–general insurrection.”

Resolution 13 underlined that the aim of winning such decisive military victories was to force the US into negotiations – which they considered urgent given the upcoming US elections in 1968 – in a situation where the Vietnamese would thus be in a stronger negotiating position. The party thus had a political-military-diplomatic strategy.

However, there was a basic problem in the plan – their military forces were not yet in a position to impose such massive defeats on the American military, in particular quickly enough to meet the timetable for an urban offensive/insurrection at Tet – Vietnamese Lunar New Year – which was to fall in late January 1968. General Van Tien Dung, recognising this problem, went behind Giáp and conferred with Le Duan, who proposed the entire set of intermediate stages, including military victories, be dropped, and instead to move immediately to the final stage of general offensive/insurrection. The insurrection would coincide with main force military attacks all round the country to divert the enemy, but would not need to wait for them to cripple the enemy’s forces.

Le Duan was thus proposing a radically ultraleft “insurrectionist” strategy, one that had no relation to either Moscow or Beijing views, and no relation even to the party disputes, since it called for ignoring not only popular support and guerilla struggle, but even main force military victories – but with the aim of forcing the Americans into negotiations.

When the plan was put to the Politburo, there was significant opposition, including from Ho Chi Minh, who stressed, among other things, that they still needed to pay attention to fighting a protracted guerilla war, and that “we must also pay attention to the need to preserve the strength of our people. If our people and our resources become exhausted, then we will not be able to fight, no matter how many troops we have.” Due to reservations of many members, Politburo approval of the full plan was delayed until December 1967, when both Ho and Giáp were out of the country for medical treatment – Ho in China and Giáp in Hungary.

Indeed, Giáp was allegedly so opposed to the plan that he extended his stay there until just after the offensive begun, to underline his displeasure with this course. Once in operation, he returned to lead it as well as he could. General Tran Van Trã , who led the southern National Liberation Front forces, those who were decimated in the offensive,

later criticised the northern leadership for not giving the NLF sufficient time to prepare for the offensive.

While it is true that the political impact on the US government and anti-war movement was ultimately enormous, it is also true that Le Duan's forcing of the "insurrection" did not lead to urban uprisings (though it was more successful in many smaller rural towns), and did lead to a US counter-attack which decimated the southern revolutionary forces. In Hue, both the excesses of the incoming revolutionary forces, and the extremely vicious US air attack, imposed no less than catastrophe on that city.

It is a very difficult thing to look back and suggest how things may have turned out better if the Ho-Giap strategy had been adopted instead, and the offensive was thus delayed. But while Giap, as a loyal party member, always publicly defended the offensive for its impact politically, the facts show he cannot be blamed for a strategy that resulted in so much death.

The fall of Saigon

Le Duan had meanwhile been consolidating power via building a core of close supporters among certain cadres within the party bureaucracy and security apparatus, and he used the Tet events against Giap. In late 1967, even before the offensive, a number of Giap's closest allies were arrested. After Ho Chi Minh, who was very close to Giap, died in 1969, Le Duan went on the offensive. It is well known that in 1972-73, a great many of Giap's closest confidantes within the party and army were demoted or "retired".

However, despite being sidelined within the party apparatus, Giap continued to play the crucial role as Defense Minister in ensuring Vietnam's victory over the US in 1975. Certainly, he was not alone – Le Duan was head of the Party Military Commission, and his ally General Van Tien Dung headed the Army General Staff. However, the book written by the latter, which became a standard party text, in which he claimed all the credit for the victory, is widely regarded to be inaccurate and wildly self-serving, omitting the role of both Giap and of the southern revolutionaries under the leadership of General Tran Van Tra.

As Colonel Bui Tin, who fought with Giap in the French war and was with Giap as a journalist for the party paper, Nhan Dan, when Saigon fell, explains:

"Giap was always in direct command throughout the 1975 offensive and it was he who really led it to victory. They (people in the know) have even produced the daily command diary of the Operations Department of the General Staff which clearly and carefully recorded every order made by Giap right down to the very minute and second when it was issued. These records also show how rapidly and daringly he reacted to developing situations. Every moment counted and most of the orders are written in his own hand. Giap was always present at the command post in the Citadel in Hanoi to follow developments, make corrections if necessary and issue immediate orders." (Following Ho Chi Minh, 1995, p. 82).

Revolutionary victories however, especially after such a horrifically destructive war which had killed millions of people, are rarely pure affairs. On the one hand comes an immense feeling of solidarity in such an achievement through such enormous collective sacrifice, and immense joy in peace after so many decades. On the other hand, the chaos of transition as a state collapses – the state of the south Vietnamese dictatorship – combined with the sense of entitlement that some may feel after so much loss and so much hell, creates openings for the twin evils of vengeance and looting, not to mention common opportunistic crime. Bui Tin reports on this moving event on May 7 1975, a few days after victory, when Giap arrived at Independence Palace in Saigon:

“An officer said that he had acquired a good-quality piano from a military base in the South which he would send to General Giap’s home in Hanoi. I have never seen Giap so angry. With his eyes blazing and uttering obscenities, he replied that it was impossible for him to accept such booty: what would everybody else who had participated in the campaign expect? After that I respected General Giap even more” (p. 87).

Giap sidelined

The decade after 1975 was extremely hard for Vietnam. The US maintained a criminal embargo on the country, denied reconstruction aid after “bombing Vietnam back into the Stone Age” as US president Lyndon Johnson had put it, while meanwhile the Chinese regime adopted an aggressive position and encouraged the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime in neighbouring Cambodia to launch murderous attacks on Vietnam’s Mekong rice bowl region. When Vietnam finally responded in 1979, entering Cambodia and helping the Cambodian people expel the Khmer Rouge, the US and China supported and armed a decade-long war by the Khmer Rouge from Thailand bases.

China even briefly invaded Vietnam in early 1979, and although it was beaten back by heroic Vietnamese resistance, this caused significant destruction and deep psychological scars. The criminal US embargo was joined by the European Union, China, Australia, the southeast Asian capitalist dictatorships and countless other countries, crippling Vietnam’s ability to recover. These circumstances also tied Vietnam more closely to the Soviet leadership and its policy choices than it would have preferred.

In such conditions, an inappropriately rapid and radical economic policy was pushed internally under Le Duan’s leadership, while the conditions of siege facilitated the exercise of a “war communist” style of political leadership. The exodus of millions of “boat people”, from where come Australia’s large Vietnamese community today, can neither be blamed simply on the extraordinary poverty of a country destroyed by war, nor on these people, often owners of micro-businesses, being expropriated “capitalists”. Big capital fled in 1975, on planes, not rickety boats. Bad policy decisions pushed through in a rush, informed more by ideology than concrete circumstances on the ground, played a major role.

It was in such circumstances that Giap, always far more a “leader of the people” than a machine man, was first removed as Secretary of the Central Military Commission in 1977, then replaced as Defence Minister by Van Tien Dung in 1980, and finally dropped from the Politburo at the 5th party congress in 1982 (but remained on the much larger Central Committee). Following the beginnings of political and economic opening (Doi Moi) after the 6th party congress in 1986, which the military were strongly supportive of and involved in, Giap got one of the deputy prime minister posts until 1991, following which he retired at 80 years of age.

Giap however never lost interest in his country’s politics, or world politics, in the very broadest sense. His first portfolio after being dropped from the Politburo was science, and he was appointed chairman of the National Committee on Population and Family Planning. Some ridiculed this (and his opponents may have even intended it this way) – as poet To Huu was concurrently made deputy prime minister, people quipped “the poet does economy and the army general places IUD contraception”. Yet Giap, always anything other than a one-dimensional military man, was in fact eminently suited to taking on jobs relevant to his country’s development.

Giap in later life: environment and democracy advocate

General Vo Nguyen Giap (1911-2013): Military hero, revolutionary intellectual, environmentalist

One of his close friends, world famous Vietnamese ecologist (and party member since 1954) Professor Vo Quy, explained to me that, in the 1980s, Giap had held largely the same ideas about “development” as most of his comrades, influenced by the Soviet model. That is, that a poor country needs to go rapidly for “large-scale” development in order to catch up. While no-one denied that Vietnam needed a good dose of this, as a “one size fits all” policy panacea it had enormous implications for a poor country that could ill-afford it, not to mention massive environmental consequences.

One day Vo Quy gave Giap the famous book *Small is Beautiful* by E.F. Schumacher. Giap, always a prolific reader, read it in one night. While he may not have accepted the book’s arguments in toto – it basically replaces a “big” development schema with a “small” one as a panacea – the effect on him was immediate, according to Vo Quy. He asked for more books on environmental issues, and since that time Giap maintained an enormous interest in these issues.

This came to a head in recent years, even with Giap at a very advanced age, with the state and party leadership falling in behind a massive project to mine bauxite and smelt aluminium in Vietnam’s Central Highlands. The Highlands have already been heavily deforested due to war and post-war development (much of the latter ill-conceived); large numbers of Vietnamese scientists and environmentalists held great fears for the environmental impact of this development on the region. In addition, the region is home to a large number of ethnic minorities, whose livelihoods depend on the forest. The potentially disastrous impact on them is also a major concern.

According to Vo Quy, the Central Highlands is an “area of stunning beauty with rich eco-tourism potential and a highly productive agricultural zone”. The damage to the environment likely caused by bauxite – including the production of thousands of tones of toxic “red sludge” – “far outweighs any economic benefits”.

In January 2009, Giap wrote the first of three open letters to the party and state leadership. He argued against the project on three grounds. The first two were that it would destroy the environment, and that it would displace the local ethnic minority people. In late April, 135 Vietnamese intellectuals and scientists signed a petition that was presented to the National Assembly, protesting this development.

In fact, Giap pointed out that Vietnam had proposed a similar project in the same region to Comecon, the Soviet-led economic bloc, in the 1980s, but Comecon advised against it, warning of devastating ecological damage, not only for residents of the highlands: it warned it “would also harm the lives and environment of people in the southern plains of the central provinces”. And China itself, hoping to exploit Vietnam’s bauxite, had closed 100 bauxite mines in China in 2004-2008 precisely due to the ecological impact.

While Giap the environmentalist was concerned with the ecology, Giap the old military man had a third concern. The bid for the project had been won by the China Aluminum Company (Chalco), a gigantic Chinese state-private share company, in a joint venture with Vietnam’s National Coal Mineral Industries Group (Vinacomin). Giap protested that, by allowing a major Chinese company into such a strategic region, bringing in thousands of Chinese workers, the project was also a threat to national security.

On May 7, on the 55th anniversary of Dien Bien Phu, he told visiting leaders that the Central Highlands “is a strategic site of the country, which is very important in defence and security, not only for Vietnam but for Indochina”.

In recent years, the Chinese government has claimed the entire South China Sea (known in Vietnam as the East Sea) as its own, including all the islands within it. Vietnam and a number of other countries also have claims to these islands. As the Vietnamese government has tried to walk a difficult fine line, between continually stressing Vietnam’s sovereignty over the islands, but refusing to contemplate war as a solution, a noisy opposition, originally focused on human rights but increasingly on nationalism, has demagogically accused the government of softness towards China. One may well ask, since the government has never conceded the islands to China, is the opposition demanding war?

There is no evidence that Giap had any sympathy with such views. However, while his issue was always primarily environmental, it is hardly surprising that a man whose entire life had been devoted to liberating his country from powerful imperialist states would have qualms about such a large-scale interest in such a strategic region from a powerful neighbour that had invaded Vietnam in recent times and which was now treating Vietnamese interests in the East Sea with aggressive contempt, including via large-scale kidnappings of dirt-poor Vietnamese fisher-folk who try to fish in the islands.

As well as the environment, Giap made his name over the last two decades as someone willing to continually speak out on the need for political reform, for the promotion of socialist democracy and more openness.

Just before the Communist Party's 10th Congress in April 2006, Giap joined several other military veterans in demanding a full-scale investigation into a massive corruption scandal that had just been unveiled, involving officials of the PMU 18 unit under the transport ministry, which was caught diverting millions of dollars targeted for infrastructure projects to gambling on premier league football matches. They demanded action "even if it led to the highest levels".

Giap also said that such scandals have "frozen the leading role of the Party and the management of the State and the supervision of the people".

Giap and socialism

The image of someone of Giap's stature as a kind of in-house, loyal party "dissident" has tended to excite many Western journalists and analysts. When he visited several years ago, US Republican leader, and former Vietnam veteran, John McCain claimed Giap had said the Americans, while wrong, were a "worthy opponent." If true, it probably reveals that Giap had a sense of humour; but just as likely it is the kind of fantasy that has become common.

A common form of fantasy is to suggest that, as an advocate of democracy, Giap might also be pro-capitalist. While I can't currently place them, I have seen media articles that sometimes ended with some vague assertion that Giap advocated a bigger role for small business, or some such fantasy. Under the Doi Moi economic renovation program, launched in 1986, Vietnam now has tens of thousands of private businesses (even while the larger strategic areas of the economy remain state-owned); there is no known tendency in the party known to oppose this overall course; and Giap is not known to hold any fundamentally different view on this overall strategy.

Such journalists probably asked him whether it was good that there was a lot of business activity, Giap replying in the affirmative; the reporter then interpreted that through his or her own framework.

The simple fact is that in all these years of speaking out on democratic, environmental and other issues, Giap has never uttered a single pro-capitalist statement, none at all. If anything, some statements can well be interpreted as frustration with the kinds of vices the market economy has brought with it.

Indeed, as pro-capitalist Vietnamese politicians never stop talking about the need for endless, classless "economic growth", often decrying that Vietnam's world class growth over the last two decades was "slow", Giap's emphasis on the environment, in particular in the bauxite case, could well be interpreted as a protest against voracious capitalism and its ignoring of the human and environmental cost.

When Fidel Castro visited Vietnam in 2003, the picture of Fidel and Giap sitting and chatting together under a portrait of Lenin spoke so many more words than all the blather of those opportunistically, and laughably, trying to associate one of world socialism's living legends with the grubby world of "free market" capitalism and the soul-less commercialisation of all human values and merciless exploitation that it offers.

And when Hugo Chavez visited in 2006, Giap praised Chavez as part of a new generation of socialist fighters: "You together with President Fidel Castro have raised the flag of nationalism and socialism." He was certainly a lot more forthright in identifying with Chavez as a socialist firebrand than most of the Vietnamese leaders at the time. The two exchanged gifts – Chavez offered a gem-encrusted replica of a sword owned by Latin American liberation hero Simon Bolivar, while Giap gave signed copies of his books on military strategy. Giap's sympathies seem straightforward enough.

Of heroes and legends

The thousands upon thousands of Vietnamese that have publicly paid their last respects to Giap, and the outpourings in the media and social media, indicate the kind of esteem Giap is held in. Many a time the views they expressed to the media were along the lines that, other than Ho himself, there are simply no other leaders comparable to Giap; no other CPV leaders, before or after Doi Moi, have ever come anywhere close to having such stature among Vietnamese people.

Meanwhile, among the Western left and socialist movements globally, the feeling exists that "one of the greats" of 20th century revolution has died, comparable to only few.

It is certainly true that not all human beings can be made of the same stuff as Giap; countless aspects of our social existence determine where we go in life. However, it is great movements of peoples for social liberation, for liberation from the chains of class society and its ruthless exploitation, that create the environment for people such as Giap to come forward and lead.

In this sense, it is hardly fair to even try to compare any current Vietnamese leaders, with responsibility for the more mundane tasks of developing a poor country, to Giap. They cannot be blamed for not rising to such heights. That said, however, a situation in which the "market", however necessary as a tool to be used in development in a country not ripe for full socialism, has come to ride roughshod over so many of the basic human values that Giap and generations of Vietnamese revolutionaries devoted, or sacrificed, their lives for, calls for new leaders with bold ideas.

Not the "bold" ideas continually pushed on Vietnam by Western governments, multinational corporations, international trading bodies and lending agencies, and all manner of "consultants" and "experts" – that Vietnam needs even more "market", even more orientation towards the "values" of pure profit seeking, more power to big capital.

But quite the opposite: that enough is enough. New leaders are needed to push a genuinely popular democratic socialist program and free the country from the nightmare view that its only salvation from its problems is even more of the rotten system of capitalism that Giap proudly spent his life trying to end. None of this requires a return to the pre-Doi Moi straightjacket that the market fundamentalists try to scare the Vietnamese people with. The country still needs lots of market in its current stage of development, but this does not require ruthless market fundamentalism. A modern, democratic socialism that uses the market as necessary and ignores and supersedes it when it can and must, a socialism that really puts working people in control in deed, not only in word, is a worthwhile goal for Vietnam.

General Vo Nguyen Giap (1911-2013): Military hero, revolutionary intellectual, environmentalist

Of course, regardless of my own views, the Vietnamese people will be the ones to decide how to get out of their current impasse. What is certain, however, is that no new heroes, no new Giaps, no new national treasures, can arise from the task of trying to push the country even further down the path of the toxic system of capitalist exploitation, greed, corruption, massive inequality and the swapping of all human values for dollar values, precisely the source of the problems Vietnam faces today.

First published in [Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal](#).