

What was the primary reason why Vietnamese communist forces were so effective in combating the superior forces and technology of France and, later, the United States?

Vietnam is a country in the South-East Asia, which is famous for its wide involvement into the anti-colonial struggle against France known as the First Indochina War and its subsequent development into the Second Indochina war, which is commonly known as the Vietnam War. The Vietnam War in turn became a hot battle of the Cold War that had thus turned into a major cockpit between the world's powers. The Indochina wars are standing out against a background of the other conflicts, because the Vietnamese managed to win a struggle against the superior forces of the US and France. The main reason why the major powers were defeated, is effective guerrilla tactics of the Vietnamese alongside with total unpreparedness of the US and France to wage an unconventional war in tropic jungles.

After the end of the World War Two and the defeat of the Germans and the Japanese, France was seeking to restore its control in Indochina. But with change of the political situation and to the disappointment of the French, loyal Bao Dai government won little public backing from the local population. The initial problem of the French administration was its non-involvement into the life of countryside. Whereas French colonialism had led to significant changes on the thinking of the urban Vietnamese, the basic outlook of peasants remained unchanged since the early centuries of Vietnamese history. As the French administration disregarded the needs of the peasants, they had minor reasons to demonstrate loyalty. Thus the peasant's first loyalty remained to be to his family, the second was village with a strong sense of community. The Vietnamese peasantry had little interest in politics and political ideas, but it "was easily influenced by men with silver tongues, even if the words bore only a slight resemblance to the truth". The Vietnamese communists, the Viet Cong, very soon understood the importance of involving the peasants into the struggle against

France and began gaining support in Vietnamese villages. The prior aim of the Viet Cong was to implant political cells in villages. The success of the propaganda on the Vietnamese populations and the weakness of the French political action rendered the French incapable of raising strong armed opposition to the communist enemy. The Viet Cong normally tried to avoid contact with the regular army, knowing that the army usually had more men and weapons than the guerrillas could handle. After the initial losses and due to the lacking armaments, Hanoi decided to put up a stop to large uprisings and attack. They understood the fact of their incapacity to wage a conventional war against France, and so the war began to take on the shape that was originally intended, that of rural insurgency they would rely on small guerrilla acting and rise gradually in intensity". Thus, French forces were imposed "the war without front" that was fought during eight years as it had as its basic goal the support of a population most often found in villages. Alongside with Viet Cong leaders with their propaganda tactics, such strategy proved to be very successful. Acting in little teams or alone, working sometimes in patrols, sometimes in agents, sometimes supported by an organized unit, sometimes by sympathizers in the villages, or perhaps only trusting in themselves, the insurgents patiently observed French

posts, French installations and movements, listened to their chit-chat, made efforts to capture a prisoner or to get hold of a document, etc. Another problem was low morale of the French troops. Very often small garrisons preferred to abandon their position rather than to expose themselves to certain destruction. The Indochinese forest covers two-thirds of the country, and the French forces appeared to be completely unprepared for such conditions. According to the French soldiers, "all offensive operations first encountered nature's defenses: it was fatigue due to the inextricable entanglement of a vegetation apparently allied with the enemy, the depressing climate, and the thousands of hostile insects". The French were inadequately informed about the enemy due to the lack of maps and agents as well as to "the excessive

time it took to transmit information in relation to the transience of objectives”. The Vietnamese used combat techniques that were simple but effective. On the other hand, the French tried to use complicated combat techniques useful in conventional wars. Their bases were mostly isolated and their movement in the tropical forest was relatively slow. The failure at Dien Bien Phu base was due to its remote position and lack of air supply. The insurgents had neither artillery nor aircraft, but the French were incapable of defending their base because of poor and insecure links between the bases. This battle, being a typical example of French struggles in the region, emphasized the importance of strategic mobility and the necessity of motorization. When there war is being waged without fronts, the qualities of the rebel are much higher than those of the soldier. Moreover, it is unrealistic to think in terms of success when being dependent on superiority of arms. With changing political climate in continental France, “By early 1953, with the fighting was entering its seventh year, and with no end in sight, French popular disenchantment with the war grew markedly”. With such conditions France passed on the baton of Vietnamese war to the US.

The subsequent US intervention in Vietnam resulted from the dissolution of colonial empires and the start of the cold war. By the time of the US intervention the revolutionary forces of Vietnam have become a “well organized and tightly disciplined” force. The US strategy did not include any innovative tactics and made no conclusions about the mistakes of the French. American reliance on high-tech responses to counter the guerrilla tactics of the Viet Cong meant the casualties inflicted on civilian population. Thus, American weaponry served to alienate peasants and increase support for the insurgents. Therefore, thanks to the Americans, the Vietnamese communists no longer needed to agitate for joining them, as their rivals did the work way better. Along with the unpreparedness to the local conditions, US forces were also weakened by the political factors, such as restriction parameters placed upon the military commanders. The US forces could not simply erode the communists from their

positions, as they had time to prepare for the defense. Making no conclusions from the French campaign, the major supply lines of the US Army were simply tied. Another problem was to find the Viet Cong fighters, as they were indistinguishable from the locals. Moreover they were organized in mobile groups and could flee to Laos, where the US forces could not reach them. In return, the communist army got the advantage over the US one. Their political strategy focused on reunification and communization of the North Vietnam. Their military strategy included three stages: stage of contention with swift attacks and withdrawals, stage of equilibrium with stocking up supplies and wearing down the enemy, and the last stage of counteroffensive, when regular forces would be supported by guerrillas. Their strategy also included pulling out enemy forces from the bases and constant moral pressure and exhaustion with the key goal of imposing unacceptable political, economic, social and military costs on the US. To accomplish, the North Vietnamese mobilized world opinion against the US.

The struggle for Indochina had become a central place in the international history of the twentieth century. Fought over a period of three decades, at the cost of millions of lives, the conflict captured in microcosm all of the grand political forces of the century:

colonialism, nationalism, communism and democratic capitalism. The North Vietnamese forces took advantage of their country's terrain and imposed humiliating guerrilla warfare on their enemies. Having been fighting the French and the US for many years and with "neither unlimited nor unequivocal" aid from China and Soviet Union, they developed great strategy of fighting and winning the enemy regardless of his technological development.

Undoubtedly, the North Vietnamese army was strong, but having considered the facts one can come to a conclusion, that the main reason why the communists were so effective, was total unpreparedness and minor experience of the Western armies of waging war in tropical conditions. Having been preparing for a conventional war, they appeared to be almost

helpless in Indochina. Together with other minor reasons, it all ended with the triumph of the North Vietnam and defeat of the United States.