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PEOPLE'S WAR: THE FRENCH IN INDOCHINA

BY

LIEUTENANT COLONEL THOMAS L. PHELPS, USAF

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The dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki represented a change in the growing complexity of war as reflected by the conflicts of 1914-1918 and 1939-1945. For the first time, man now had the capability not merely to defeat and destroy his enemy but to obliterate him almost instantly. Yet for all the apparent "simplicity" of nuclear weapons, their existence has made warfare more complex than ever. With the tremendous increase in destructiveness, greater care must now be taken to limit the conduct of war; this, in turn, means more sophisticated weapons, increasingly complex command and control systems and the utter necessity of coordinating ends and means in war as well as in the conduct of national policy prior to war. At the same time, these developments have meant an even closer relationship between society and war, both in the sense that society is now a primary target (or at least sure to be hit in the peripheral fall-out) and in the sense of the economic and social costs of having to be prepared constantly for destructive war. Ironically, at the same time modern conventional and nuclear war had become so deadly, the world witnessed a tremendous increase in warfare at the other end of the spectrum, at the level of unconventional warfare. Yet it is not so paradoxical as it may at first appear to state that unconventional war is another reflection of the growing complexity of war. A form of war whose primary weapon and primary objective, to an extent far exceeding that of conventional or nuclear war, is the hearts and minds of the people and in which the enemy cannot be distinguished by uniform, language or the like, requires a degree of sophistication often blurred by the primitive weapons of those who conduct it. This paper provides a basic understanding of the phenomenon of people's war, both by considering theory and by looking at the French experience in Indochina (1945-1954).

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PEOPLE'S WAR: THE FRENCH IN INDOCHINA

AN INDIVIDUAL STUDY PROJECT

by

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ABSTRACT

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## CHAPTER I

### PEOPLE'S WAR: THE THEORY

World War II marked a watershed in the history of military affairs. The war completed many trends: mass armies supported by the mobilized industrial base of the state, the use of all informational media to propagandize the population and the employment of military means to destroy both the enemy's armed forces and the civilian population supporting his war effort. In short, it was total war for total victory.

The war also introduced a new, menacing reality -- the threat of nuclear war. The bomb seemed to epitomize total war. Military and civilian leaders wrestled with what the bomb meant to future warfare and whether nuclear weapons could be a rational tool of political policy. Some considered war unthinkable because of the inevitable use of nuclear weapons; others believed future wars would be consciously limited in scope and intensity to avoid the use of the bomb.

The Korean War clearly supported the latter idea. The superpowers tacitly, if perhaps unwillingly, agreed to limit the war geographically, militarily and politically. Both sides accepted less than complete victory to avoid a widening war and the threat of nuclear weapons. Korea indicated a new trend in the application of military force. Armies still fought conventional wars, with clear distinctions between civilians and military combatants, battle lines easily

traceable on the map, reliance on sophisticated technology and advances and retreats that translated into political gains and losses at the conference table. The contending powers, however, recognized the need to limit the use of their weapons for fear of creating a nuclear monster that could destroy them all. In essence, the superpowers stood at the edge of a precipice of total destruction at the end of World War II and were forced to step back.

But, while military and civilian leaders studied the lessons of World War II and Korea -- preparing to fight the last war, as some critics put it -- a new military development began to occupy their attention. The phenomenon of "people's war" seemed to explode in the underdeveloped world between 1945-75. In contrast to "conventional" war, people's war featured no battle lines, no easy way to tell civilians from combatants and no sure measure of success or failure. If victory in conventional war could be measured by the number of aircraft shot down, towns and prisoners taken and miles covered, victory in people's war hinged on controlling the "hearts and minds" of a nation's population. Faced with this new threat, western military leaders struggled to find ways to defeat it.

First, they needed to define people's war. Many considered it simply guerrilla warfare to be combatted with military power alone. But people's war was first and foremost, a war of ideas and exceedingly hard to defeat. The military



side of people's war often centered on guerrilla or irregular operations and relied on the tactics of the weak and poorly-equipped against the strong: ambushes, booby traps, hit-and-run raids and terrorism. The tactics were not revolutionary -- every war in history featured these types of military engagements. People's war used guerrilla tactics, but it encompassed more than just unconventional operations and weapons.

Nor was people's war unique because it projected objectives; all wars seek to achieve political goals for a state or group. The idea of people's war as a 20th century phenomenon also is misleading, because all wars have been "people's wars." If we consider people's war a mixture of political objectives and unconventional military operations, the war in the southern colonies during the American Revolution and the Spanish people's struggle to rid the Iberian Peninsula of Napoleon were both people's wars. The former was a "revolutionary" war because the Americans sought to replace an existing government with a new one. The war against Napoleon in Spain was a "Partisan" war because the Spaniards sought to reestablish the previous legitimate government -- the Spanish king deposed by Napoleon.

If guerrilla operations have long been conducted and studied, why then, did people's war present so many problems to regular military officers after World War II? The answer to that question, and the definition of people's war, lies with two "isms" that developed in the 19th Century and emerged, after World War II: nationalism and communism. The people's

wars fought after World War II occurred in colonies of the major European nations and manifested the desire of colonial peoples for independence. This quest, especially in Asia, had existed earlier, but World War II accelerated the growth of nationalism. Though the Japanese eventually fell to the Western allies, the initial French and British reversals demonstrated that Asians could defeat their colonial masters. This realization, coupled with the weakened military positions of the European powers, led to a tremendous upsurge of Asian nationalism after the war.

Communism was the second idea that made people's war such a threat to the Western powers after World War II. Karl Marx's doctrine offered assurances of inevitable social and economic progress, the development of a classless and egalitarian society and justified opposition to capitalist economic and political exploitation. In short, communism offered developing nations an ideology and a solution tailor made to their national problems.

Communism also provided a theoretical framework and tool with which to solve the problems of developing nations. Vladimir Lenin and the Russian communists developed the idea of the Party as an instrument for leading the people in seizing power. Marx had argued that the Party followed the workers' lead in developing the socialist revolution. Lenin, concerned with conducting revolution in a repressive police state, believed that the Party had to lead the workers, expand their knowledge

and assume the leading role in the revolution. The revolution would not evolve gradually, but would be planned and instigated by the Party, a small, elite group of disciplined, full-time revolutionaries serving as the "vanguard" of the working class. Through the workers' political education and its members' activism, the Party would ignite and guide the revolution.

Lenin, a pragmatic observer of the Russian scene, believed that the Russian public was not advanced sufficiently enough politically to depose the Tsar and simultaneously adopt communism; nor was the Party powerful enough to lead both revolutions simultaneously. The revolution, therefore, would have to occur in two phases: nationalist first and then communist. During the first phase communists would cooperate with other nationalist groups to bring down the Tsarist regime, even though they considered non-communists as great an enemy as the Tsar himself. Cooperation in a "united front" during the revolution's first phase was an acceptable but temporary expedient to build a base of popular support for communism. The second revolution would begin once the nationalist revolution succeeded, and the Communist Party had become a major political force. Communists then would drive the other nationalist groups from power and stand alone in the end. The Party would build popular support through its economic message and by claiming leadership of the nationalist movement.

The Russian Revolution was guided by a small revolutionary party leading an urban group of disaffected students,

intellectuals, soldiers and factory workers. But, could their successful technique be repeated in the economically backward, poorly educated, agrarian nations of Africa and Asia? While Marx, Frederick Engels, and Lenin laid the theoretical foundations of people's war, Mao Tse-tung constructed the framework which allowed it to become a major force in many nations after World War II.

Because of his central role as a political and military thinker, Mao's contributions merit extensive discussion. Founded in 1921, the Chinese Communist Party was initially an urban-based group attempting to foment revolution among Chinese industrial workers. Mao considered this effort futile in an overwhelmingly rural and agrarian society such as China's; Mao believed that the revolution should begin among the impoverished and oppressed Chinese farmers. The Chinese, he argued, should follow a rural rather than urban path to revolution, with the Party as the leading force.

In addition to political theory, Mao studied the military elements of revolution and addressed the problems of fighting China's official government (the Kuomintang), and the Sino-Japanese War that began in 1937. Mao pondered how the militarily weak Chinese could defeat the stronger, technically advanced enemy, and concluded that their salvation lay in protracted war to wear down the Japanese. By this process the Chinese would gradually turn their initial inferiority into military superiority.

Mao believed the protracted war against Japan would pass through three stages, though without a timetable; the Chinese would move from one stage to another as the situation required. Thus, flexibility marked Mao's military thought. In the first stage, the strategic defensive, the Chinese would fight a mobile, conventional defense supplemented by guerrilla operations. The Communist Party prepared the population for military action and stressed socialist political, social and economic programs. In this organizational period, the Party concentrated on building strong, secure operational bases. The objective was to retreat and trade space for time, draw the Japanese out and avoid a crushing defeat at their hands, and persuade the Chinese population to support the communist cause. With the Japanese extended, the front stabilized in a war of attrition. At this point the second phase of operations, the strategic stalemate, commenced while the Chinese waged a guerrilla war against the Japanese occupying the Chinese interior. In characterizing this period of attritional guerrilla warfare, Mao referred to the guerrillas as "fish" who operated in a "sea" of Chinese peasants. The "fish" would be impossible to locate and could strike at a time and place of their choosing. At some point, according to Mao, the Japanese would be so weakened that the communists could enter the third and final phase of the war, the strategic offensive, characterized by large conventional armies waging mobile, extensive campaigns which would result in the defeat of the Japanese.

Protracted, attritional war was not new, nor did it guarantee defeat of the Japanese, who were vastly superior in supplies, firepower, technology and conventional military expertise. Mao believed the deciding fact was spiritual (though not in the same sense of "religious") power. The three-phased military strategy would buy the Party time to accomplish mobilization and overcome the material superiority of the Japanese. Mao clearly explained the importance of spiritual power: "Weapons are an important factor in war, but not the decisive factor; it is people, not things, that are decisive. The contest of strength is not only a contest of military and economic power, but also a contest of human power and morale."<sup>1</sup> Communism's promise of a better life, with the Party serving as the guiding light to fulfillment, offered the means to accomplish this spiritual mobilization. Mao, however, believed that the Party must lead the nationalist revolution against Japan before the communist revolution against the Kuomintang could succeed.

Political education provided the key to the growth of spiritual power. Extensive political education would build close ties between the Party, the army, and the people, who, once united, would defeat the Japanese. Mao believed the source of Chinese strength lay in the people themselves; this strength flowed from political education ("correct subjective direction"):

The richest source of power to wage war lies in the masses of the people...The army must become one with the people, so that they see it as their own army...soldiers are the foundation of an army; unless they are imbued with a progressive

political spirit, and unless such a spirit is instilled through progressive political work ...it will be impossible to arouse their enthusiasm for the War of Resistance to the full, and impossible to provide a sound basis for the most effective use of all our technical equipment and tactics. 2

Political education motivated the troops and guided weapons employment and battlefield tactics. The result of political education and spiritual motivation by the Party was inevitable: "If the Army and people are united as one, who in the world can match them?"<sup>3</sup> For Mao, the political struggle to win over the population to communism was the key to revolution and had to be won before the military struggle could be successful. Military operations supported political education. He wrote:

"When the Red Army fights, it fights not merely for the sake of fighting, but to agitate the masses, to organize them...and to help them establish revolutionary political power; apart from such objectives, fighting loses its meaning and the Red Army the reason for its existence." 4

Military action remained flexible in the field. While emphasizing guerrilla tactics, Mao argued that they only wore down the enemy; the war could be won only by large-scale conventional offensives. The war of weapons, however, could only succeed if the war of ideas--the war for the hearts and minds--was won first.

How did Mao's theory work in practice? During the Sino-Japanese War the Communist Party gradually developed secure bases of operations in the countryside. From these bases the Party conducted military operations against the Japanese and educated and organized the Chinese population at the same time.

The Party's educational and propaganda campaigns and social and economic programs aimed to convince the people that the Party offered the only viable opposition to the Japanese. During the war, the people saw the Party fighting the Japanese much more vigorously than did the central government. Similarly, a majority of peasants believed that the Party was more concerned with their welfare than were the government's leaders who appeared interested only in increasing their personal wealth.

With Japan's defeat in 1945 the communists, with some justification, claimed that they had led the resistance and proclaimed a new struggle to free the peasants from the abuses and exploitation of the Kuomintang. Mao combined these two powerful themes and called on the peasants to follow the Party in its continuing struggle for China's liberation. His success in harnessing the peasants' nationalism and desire for reform, combined with the Party's organizational skills, Soviet aid and the mistakes of the Kuomintang, led to a communist triumph in 1949.

After World War II Mao's ideas were adopted by many third world peoples as they sought political and economic liberation from their European masters. Though many nationalist groups participated in the fight for liberation, in each country the Communist Party, through superior organization, discipline and training, attempted to convince



a majority that it had led the political and military struggle. The stronger, more technologically advanced European opponent was worn down through insurgency, allowing the Party to win more adherents and increase its regular military strength. With the enemy sufficiently weakened, a final conventional offensive would be launched to drive them out. As the leader of the nationalist revolution, the Party then achieved its second goal, establishment of a communist state.

The potent mix of nationalism organization, and military power made people's war prominent after World War II. Communism, promising inevitable progress toward a better life and opposing imperialism, provided the peoples of many developing nations with a powerful, appealing alternative to colonialism. Japan's initial victories in World War II suggested that Asian or African nationalism could defeat the European colonial powers. Lenin's success provided the Communist Party's rationale and framework as a highly motivated, disciplined and ruthless organization that could capitalize on the people's grievances and lead them to revolution. Finally, Mao outlined a rural-based, agrarian revolution that could wear down any enemy, foreign or domestic, through political action and military attrition. His idea of mobilized spiritual power also provided a tool to defeat a group superior in conventional military power just as Mao seemed to have done to the Japanese and the Kuomintang. The formula for people's

war -- it could be called the "war of the flea" -- was one which, if resolutely applied, could bring down the elephant.<sup>5</sup>

As European powers, limited by wartime losses and increasingly concerned by the spread of communism, reestablished control of their colonial empires after World War II, they encountered determined peoples engaged in this war of the flea. A reluctant United States, opposed to the reestablishment of the colonies but also uneasy about the growing appeal of communism and the deteriorating situation in China, supported the Europeans. America recognized the legitimacy of the colonial people's desire for independence but believed the chaos of the nationalist upheavals gave the communists a golden opportunity to expand their gains in the rapidly emerging "cold war." The Americans pressed the Europeans to grant their colonies independence; still, they supported colonialism as an alternative to communism. To many colonial peoples, the United States seemed not only to oppose communism, but also national independence. The fruits of this tragic perception were later clearly revealed in America's Vietnam experience.

France, attempting to regain control of its Indochina colonies, became the first European nation to confront this new "people's war." A word of caution, however, before examining the French experience. People's war is more an idea than a plan of action. Its theory, application and results are dependent on the people who support and resist it. Each example is unique and depends on a complex mixture of

geography, culture, history and political and military power. An understanding of the principles provides insights into their application, but to assume that rules of combatting people's war can be drawn up and applied to all situations in checklist fashion is a very risky exercise.

## CHAPTER II

### PEOPLE'S WAR: THE PRACTICE

Before World War II, the crown jewel of Paris' Asian colonial empire was French Indochina. This distant, exotic region of Southeast Asia included three kingdoms: Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. The land area totalled 284,800 square miles, and ranged from mountainous, rugged highlands to lush agricultural lowlands, well-watered by numerous streams and rivers. Dense triple-canopy jungle covered half the area and bush or six-foot high elephant grass, grew on another third. The remaining low land was given over to rice cultivation. Located in the Asian monsoon region, Indochina received heavy rainfall during half the year.<sup>6</sup>

Vietnam, the most important of the three kingdoms to France, consisted of three geographical regions: Tonkin in the north, Annam in the central part of the country and Cochin China in the south. The two most important rivers in Vietnam were the Red in the north and the Mekong in the south. Both widened to deltas as they approached the sea and were centers of population and crop cultivation, hence French political and military power.

Vietnam enjoyed an ancient, highly developed culture; though greatly influenced by China, it possessed a long tradition of resistance to Chinese domination. French traders

and missionaries first penetrated Indochina in the 18th Century and by the middle of the 19th Century they had established an extensive presence, especially in Vietnam. In 1863 they occupied part of Annam; in 1867 Cochin China became a colony administered as a French province. Cambodia became a colony in 1884; Laos a protectorate in 1892. The French discouraged the organization of national political parties and disrupted traditional Indochinese culture and values. Their firms dominated the area's economy, and enforced ties with France precluded any balanced economic development.

Despite domination of Indochina, the French struggled continually with Vietnamese nationalist movements. During World War I tension increased when thousands of young Vietnamese served in France as laborers and soldiers. They contrasted the ideals of "liberty, fraternity and equality," for which they were fighting with the colonial domination of Vietnam, and reflected on the discrepancies between the ideal and the reality. Just as important, many met with members of French leftist political groups and were exposed to the ideas of socialism and communism and, after 1917, the Russian Revolution.

One of the Vietnamese then in France would later play an especially important role in the struggle for Vietnamese independence. Nguyen That Thanh was born in 1892 in a north central Vietnamese province known for its traditional peasant revolts. He left home at nineteen to work as a cabin boy on

a French merchant ship; World War I found him in Paris, with close ties to Vietnamese nationalist groups there. He changed his name to Nguyen Ai Quoc ("Nguyen the Patriot"), and rapidly became a leader of young dissatisfied Vietnamese intellectuals and students living in France. Imbued with a combination of nationalism and leftist idealism, he presented a petition for Vietnamese Independence, based in part on Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, to the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. Rebuffed in his attempt to secure independence, he retained close ties with the French left and in 1923 traveled as a delegate of the French Communist Party to Moscow for the Congress of Peasant Internationals. He temporarily dropped from French attention but remained active in the independence movement; by the 1940s the French knew him as Ho Chi Minh ("He who enlightens").

Ho was one of many intellectuals active among the growing number of young Vietnamese in Indochina and France seeking independence, many of whom were influenced by communism. Non-communist groups favored independence but laced popular support because they tended to consist of upper class Vietnamese who, though opposed to French control, often had close economic and social ties to France. Vietnamese leaders influenced by socialist or communist ideas wanted both independence and far-reaching social and economic reforms.

Guidance and inspiration for these socialist leaders came from the French and Russian Communist Parties. After

Ho's journey to Russia in 1923, he stayed on to study communist doctrine, strategy and tactics. By 1925 he had traveled to China, where he organized the left-wing Association of Vietnamese Revolutionary Youth and agitated against French rule in Indochina. In 1930 Ho helped organize the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP).

Both communist and non-communist independence groups sponsored agitation and uprisings against the French in 1930-31. All met defeat forcing the surviving leadership to operate underground. This period of repression proved crucial for all the nationalist groups but especially for the communists, who were schooled and hardened by the experience. They used propaganda and sporadic terror attacks, recruited members, organized secret cells and increased training. A disciplined, tough and professional group of revolutionaries emerged, committed to their final goal -- the independence of Vietnam and the establishment of a socialist order.

By 1940, despite continual French efforts to infiltrate and destroy them, the Vietnamese independence movements were growing vigorously. Both communist and non-communist groups worked actively, but the former increasingly became the center of anti-French resistance. While still trying to cope with the independence movement the French shifted their attention to a new threat, the Japanese. In late 1940 the Japanese improved their strategic position, reduced the flow of supplies to Chiang Kai-shek in China and approached the rich resources

of Southeast Asia which were crucial in the event of war with the United States. They pressed Paris for concessions in Indochina, especially in Vietnam, and the French, weakened politically and militarily from their defeat by the Nazis in June, relented. On September 22 Japanese troops landed at Haiphong and occupied strategic points in the interior; they were chiefly interested in the geographic and economic benefits of Indochina and left the political administration of the region to France. However, French difficulties increased because the Japanese favored Vietnamese nationalist as a means of reducing French influence in Indochina.

The ICP had previously joined "united fronts" with non-communist groups to liberate Vietnam. This enabled the communists to penetrate the non-communist groups and gain control through propaganda, superior organization, and party discipline. By adopting a united front, they accepted Lenin's approach to communist revolution following the nationalist one, since the party controlling the nationalist uprisings could best influence the country's politics, society and economy after the revolution. To this end, in May 1941 the ICP helped organize the multiparty League for the Independence of Vietnam. Popularly called the "Vietminh", it was a coalition of social and political parties, and patriotic, religious, and revolutionary groups fighting the French and Japanese. From the beginning the communists sought to control



the Vietminh and through it, conduct political action to organize the Vietnamese people. They emphasized nationalism while social revolution and military action received second billing on the communist agenda.

The communists worked diligently throughout World War II to build political support and identify themselves in the popular mind as the spearhead of the independence movement. They succeeded in both attempts, especially in the Viet Bac region, the mountainous area north and northeast of Hanoi along the Chinese border. This region became the communist stronghold against both the Japanese and the French. By 1943 Ho had assumed leadership of the Vietminh, and in 1944 communist guerrilla units operated throughout the north against the Japanese. On December 22, 1944, in an indication of growing communist strength, Vo Nguyen Giap assumed command of the first units of the regular Vietnam People's Army.

By early 1945 the Japanese were increasingly concerned over the growing Allied threat to Southeast Asia. On March 9 they moved against the French political and military administration in Vietnam, arresting civilian and military officials, destroying or neutralizing French military capability and assuming active administration of the country. To the Vietminh, the long-awaited moment to revolt had arrived. French power had been neutralized, and Japanese defeat seemed imminent. Ho and the Vietminh leadership decided to launch the revolution when the Japanese surrendered but before the Allied occupation of Indochina could begin.

The Vietminh struck when the Japanese surrendered on August 14, 1945. In the political vacuum created by the collapse of French and Japanese power, they emerged as the de facto government of Vietnam. When Bao Dai, the titular emperor of Vietnam, abdicated in favor the Vietminh on August 25, many Vietnamese felt his action gave the seal of legitimacy to the Vietminh. On September 2, Ho formally declared the establishment of the independent Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV).

The French could not reassert their authority in Indochina immediately. The Potsdam Agreement, signed by the Allies in July 1945, allowed Chinese forces to occupy Vietnam south to the 16th Parallel, with British troops controlling Vietnam below that line pending the French arrival. Because the former desired a buffer state between themselves and the French in the south, the Chinese occupation aided the consolidation of Vietminh power in the north. British troops arrived in Saigon and September 12; French soldiers did not land until October then gradually began to reassert their authority in the south.

Although the Communists already controlled an independent state in northern Vietnam, the French refused to recognize it. Between September 1945 and December 1946, both sides engaged in intense political maneuverings. The DRV established a functioning government and expanded its mass political education and organization programs. Ho called for negotiations over the future of Vietnam as part of the French empire and proposed

that Tonkin, Annam and Cochin China be granted independence under Vietminh rule. The French, on the other hand, were determined to fully reassert their political and economic control throughout Indochina. While this impasse continued, Ho worked to consolidate his political and military strength in the north.

On March 6, 1946, the French agreed to recognize the DRV as a free state within the French Union with its own national assembly, armed forces and finances. In exchange, Ho agreed to allow French military units to return to the North. Under the terms of the agreement the French could establish 25,000 troops in northern garrisons, but they were to be withdrawn over five years. Despite the appearance of a settlement, both sides regarded it only as a temporary truce.

The final clash was not long delayed. Negotiations continued but foundered on French refusal to grant full independence and Vietminh unwillingness to accept anything less. In September 1946 talks broke down completely, and both sides braced for a military showdown. Fighting broke out in Haiphong in November when the French attempted to reduce illegal arms shipments to the Vietminh by seizing control of the port's customs authority. The military phase of the revolution began in earnest on December 19 when the Vietminh launched widespread attacks against French garrisons and positions.

By 1947 a military and political pattern had emerged which characterized the war to its very end, reflecting in many ways the later American experience in Vietnam. French military strength grew to approximately 100,000 troops equipped with automatic weapons and artillery and supported by armored, air and naval units. The Vietminh, in contrast, were poorly equipped at the outset with only light weapons captured from the Japanese or French. They were especially weak in heavy weapons and artillery and without air and naval support.

Despite its superiority in troops, technology and firepower, the French could not close with and destroy the Vietminh. The French held the population centers of the Red and Mekong river deltas and Annam; in essence, they controlled the cities and major transportation routes. From these major bases, French troops searched for the Vietminh. In the countryside, however, the jungle cover and frequently difficult terrain made the enemy difficult to fix in place and destroy. The French used trucks and armor extensively, as well as paratroop drops to pin the enemy or block his retreat. Yet, once off the road, the French were reduced to walking, operating over terrain well-known to the enemy and full of Vietminh activists and sympathizers. French troops often remarked that they controlled Vietnam -- to the extent of 100 yards either side of the roads.<sup>7</sup> The French also used air power extensively for fire support, aerial resupply and paratroop operations. Like the later American experience, French air attacks proved most successful when the Vietminh conducted large scale

conventional attacks or sustained defensive operations and could be precisely located. For the most part, air power's greatest contributions to the French war effort were parachute operations and resupply. Air-to-ground attacks were limited by shortages of aircraft and spare parts, limited range and loiter time of the aircraft and difficulties in identifying targets in rough terrain and thick jungles. Overall, air power did not make a decisive contribution to the French war effort.

With firepower superiority, but lacking off-road mobility and military intelligence, the French relied on lightning raids to locate and destroy Vietminh units before they could react. Americans would later term such actions "search and destroy" operations. At first, the French succeeded in the north because the Vietminh sought to defend fixed positions. But, once the communists learned that they could not stand up against superior French firepower, they melted into the jungle only to return at a time and place which guaranteed them superiority.

At the beginning of the war the Vietminh, convinced they had sufficient strength, fought a series of conventional engagements against the French. Because of superior French firepower and skill, the Vietminh suffered very heavy casualties with little to show for their losses. After the failure of conventional operations the Vietminh were forced

to switch to guerrilla warfare. They avoided decisive combat, and rebuilt their military strength by acquiring more weapons and increasing training. They also continued to build the revolution by training and mobilizing the people through political action, indoctrination and solidifying opposition to the French. As professional communist revolutionaries, the Vietminh understood Lenin's theories and the execution of the Russian Revolution; as Asians, they studied the Chinese Communist struggle. They recognized the similarities between their revolution and those of the Russians and Chinese, and knew their conventional military inferiority could only be overcome through a war of attrition and a political organization designed to stimulate Vietnamese nationalist sentiment. General Giap attested to the central role of the Communist Party in accomplishing both:

The application of this strategy of long-term resistance required a whole system of education, a whole ideological struggle among the people and Party members...The Vietnam People's Army has been created by the Party, which ceaselessly trains and educates it. It has always been and will always be under the LEADERSHIP OF THE PARTY which alone has made it into a revolutionary army, a true people's army...Therefore the political work in its ranks is of the first importance. IT IS THE SOUL OF THE ARMY.<sup>8</sup>

Giap described the main priority in the struggle:  
"Political activities were more important than military activities; and fighting less important than propaganda...  
It was the Party's leadership which was the fundamental

guarantee of the success of our people's armed struggle."<sup>9</sup> Political education centered on awakening and expanding resistance to French occupation. Socialism and communism, though discussed at length by the Vietminh, held secondary importance until the end of the war. Instead, they sold nationalism and independence and portrayed the Party's leadership as the means to achieve it.

The Vietnamese revolution was primarily nationalist rather than communist, making it difficult for the French to combat it. Paris was determined to retain the Indochinese states within the French Union. Failing to reach an agreement with the Vietminh, France attempted to build a provisional government under the leadership of Bao Dai, the Vietnamese emperor, who would serve as an alternative to the communist Vietminh. Such a government would undercut the Vietminh, while its close relationship with France would ensure Paris' effective control of Vietnam. Unfortunately, the French would not agree to a government that possessed real independence, and most Vietnamese nationalists would not support a mere puppet of French colonial authorities. Further, the Vietminh often terrorized collaborators to discourage support of the French and Bao Dai. Because of this dilemma, Vietminh power and prestige grew, while French authority eroded. In April 1948 the French agreed in principle to the union of Cochin China, Annam and Tonkin, with Bao Dai as the titular head of the country, which would remain in the French Union. The

French, however, retained de facto control. Bao Dai resigned as emperor in May 1949, and became chief of the new state. In the popular mind, however, the Vietminh remained the country's true government since they were leading the drive to oust the French.

With the political impasse, the French decided increased military action offered the best solution. By 1949 French strength had grown to 150,000 troops, in addition to Bao Dai's Pro-French Vietnamese army. However, combat did not break the Vietminh, in part because many French troops were unavailable for offensive action. Fearing Vietminh surprise attack, French units garrisoned the cities and transportation nets, leaving the countryside largely to the Vietminh. French commanders, drawing upon their heritage of colonial warfare, adopted pacification as a means of securing the countryside and neutralizing Vietminh support. By controlling the rural areas, they hoped to eliminate Vietminh bases and build popular support for the Bao Dai government.

Pacification was accomplished through a technique known as Tache d'Huile ("the oilspot").<sup>10</sup> French units entered an area and then, like a drop of oil soaking into cloth, fanned out, occupied the ground, rooted out the Vietminh political and military organizations, and attempted their own political action and civil improvement campaigns. After "pacifying" one area, the troops would enter an adjacent area and repeat the process. Soon, large regions of insurgents were cleaned out.



The success of Tache d'Huile and French counter-insurgency depended on several critical points. The limited number of troops available operated on a continuous offensive, called "whirl-wind" tactics by the French.<sup>11</sup> In theory, this offensive would locate the elusive Vietminh and destroy them. In reality the constant offensive fell victim to Clausewitz's "friction of war" -- troops tired, vehicles broke down, resupply could not keep pace with expenditures and offensive power rapidly eroded through constant battle.

Military pacification and political reeducation began behind the shield of these constant offensives, yet the French lacked the manpower to attack and pacify simultaneously. Pacification required troops to remain in one location for a long period of time; hence, they were unavailable for operations elsewhere. Given the requirement for constant offensive operations to keep the Vietminh off balance and deny them the initiative, most French troops found themselves attacking. As a result, pacification inevitably suffered.

The solution demanded either more French manpower or "Vietnamization" of the war by using Vietnamese troops. Neither was possible. The French government decided early on to avoid creating a large domestic anti-war movement by using only volunteers to fight in Indochina; French draftees could not be ordered to the war. At the same time, many Vietnamese opposed fighting for Bao Dai, who they increasingly

perceived as a French puppet. Those who did fight lived in fear of Vietminh terrorist reprisal against their families or friends. Though a manpower ratio of at least ten-to-one is generally required to wage a successful counterinsurgency, French commanders often fought with a ratio of one-to-one or worse.<sup>12</sup> There simply were not enough troops to meet the growing Vietminh threat.

The Vietminh, influenced by the Chinese experience and Mao's theories, conducted guerrilla operations and a gradual conventional military buildup as their political power grew; a final conventional offensive would destroy French will to continue the war. As the military stalemate continued through 1948, the Vietminh continued building the revolution. They solidified their strength in the main base area of Viet Bac and in the Red River delta area of the north. Giap recruited quite successfully despite French opposition. At the outset of the war, his largest unit was usually a 2,500-man regiment, but by 1949 the VPA fielded 5,000-man brigades, and by 1950, 10,000-man regular army division operated in the field.<sup>13</sup> As the political crusade gained support, Giap developed a three-tiered military force by 1947-48. Regular main force units -- tough, professional and equipped with the best weapons the Vietminh could obtain -- headed the army and operated throughout the country. Regional forces, working in specific geographical areas and assisting the regular forces, constituted the second level. At the bottom of the

tier, but the most numerous, were the local militia forces whose chief task was moving supplies and providing intelligence for the units up the chain. With agents or sympathizers in every area, the Vietminh often could secure real-time intelligence about French operations and troop dispositions -- something the French rarely achieved against their enemy.

A military stalemate developed from 1946 to 1949 because the Vietminh severely lacked weapons, ammunition and equipment. Their main sources of supply were weapons stocks and supply dumps captured from Japanese and French units; they were especially limited in heavy weapons and artillery. A significant change occurred in 1949 and contributed greatly to the final Vietminh victory. The communist victory in China that year provided the Vietminh with a friendly neighbor to the north, a military sanctuary and most importantly, a huge supply of Soviet and Chinese weapons and equipment in addition to stocks of Japanese weapons captured in China. Heavy weapons and artillery began to appear in extensive quantity for the first time in Vietminh arsenals.

The Vietminh were greatly influenced by Mao's theories and believed they had progressed in their military and political campaigns to the point where they were ready to enter the third state of the war -- mobile, conventional operations. Buoyed by new weapons and equipment, military successes against conventional French military forces and progress in their political and propaganda campaigns in Vietnam, the Vietminh attempted to precipitate a French

collapse in 1950. In January, Ho declared the DRV to be the only representative government for Vietnam. Not surprising, the communist bloc countries immediately acknowledged his claim. In response, Western nations recognized the Bao Dai government, and the United States -- albeit reluctantly -- began a program of military aid for Indochina to shore up the eroding French position. Friction arose between the two allies because the United States preferred to aid Bao Dai directly, while the French wanted to administer the aid. The United States, though opposed to the French reasserting control over their colonial empire, increasingly feared the growing communist threat to Asia. Fearful of "losing" southeast Asia, as China had been "lost" to the communists a year before, American leaders decided to aid Bao Dai -- a decision of momentous consequence for both Americans and Vietnamese.

With the political progress made in 1950, Giap decided to initiate stage III military operations. Beginning in February 1950, Giap destroyed French military posts along the Sino-Vietnamese border which opened the way to a huge influx of supplies from China. With weapons, equipment and training from the Chinese he built up his army; by October he had nearly doubled the size of the regular forces to five divisions -- four in the Viet Bac and one operating in the Mekong Delta. Three of the divisions were equipped with field and anti-aircraft artillery and mortars.<sup>14</sup>

In 1951, Giap tested the strength of these new divisions in large-scale combat against French units. A January attack, aimed ultimately at Hanoi and Haiphong, sent two divisions against the French garrison at Vinh Yen, forty-five miles northwest of Hanoi. Though he overwhelmed the garrison, Giap lost 6,000 troops killed in action and another 8,000 wounded.<sup>15</sup> In March he struck again, this time at Mao Khe near the coast of Hanoi. The initial success was offset by the loss of 3,000 troops, and Giap withdrew to the Viet Bac.<sup>16</sup> Once again, French firepower and mobility in a setpiece battle proved superior. Realizing conditions were not yet right for a conventional defeat of French forces, Giap abandoned major conventional operations and, in essence, returned to the second phase of Mao's concept of people's war. The VPA resumed guerrilla operations while Giap began to rebuild his shattered regular divisions.

Despite successes against the Vietminh in the 1951 fighting, French officers realized that they had gained only a temporary respite. The French suffered from two major weaknesses. First, and most important, they could not achieve a political solution to end the fighting. Second, they lacked troops and could not find and fix the Vietminh. French losses since 1946 averaged 2,500 per year; nearly 6,000 troops fell in the frontier battles in 1950. Though French forces now numbered 152,000, many were tied to defensive positions.<sup>17</sup>

The French generally relied on static positions in 1950. Their commander, Marshal Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, alarmed by the growing Vietminh strength in the Viet Bac and the threat it posed to French control of Hanoi, Haiphong and the Red River Delta, pulled back large numbers of French troops to defend this extremely vulnerable area. He also ordered construction of a defensive perimeter, known as the de Lattre Line, around the delta. De Lattre reorganized his troops and pondered new methods of dealing with the Vietminh menace. The policy of continuous offensives and pacification clearly had failed, yet de Lattre knew he could not wait indefinitely behind defensive lines. Only carrying the war to the enemy would he be successful.

Attempting to exploit the Vietminh defeats in 1951, de Lattre decided to modify French formations and step up offensive operations by seizing advanced positions in the heart of Vietminh territory and forcing the enemy to fight. The Vietminh could then be caught in the open and destroyed by superior French firepower. The French recognized the nature of the gamble; if the offensive degenerated into battle of attrition they could ill-afford the potential losses. De Lattre introduced a number of new tactical formations to provide the increased mobility to make such a strategy work. He organized mobile groups, regimental combat teams composed of armor and infantry designed to operate independently. Though mechanized, mobile and possessing plenty of firepower, they

were often roadbound and subject to ambush. He also created new French naval units that steamed Vietnamese rivers and provided invaluable assistance to the army. Called "Dinassauts", these assault forces consisted of locally modified, heavily armed and armored U.S. World War II amphibious assault ships. Twelve to eighteen ships made up each formation, and their shallow draft and heavy firepower allowed them to move far inland on the rivers to accompany the ground troops.

De Lattre also addressed anew the problems of counter-insurgency and pacification. Beginning in 1951, he ordered long-range penetration and commando raids in the Viet Bac by Composite Airborne Commando Groups to establish contact with the local population and rouse them against the Vietminh. Though terribly difficult and dangerous work for the French and their Vietnamese allies, there were over 20,000 French sponsored guerrillas operating in Vietminh controlled territory by 1954.<sup>18</sup>

With their reorganization completed by late 1951, the French struck. They broke up a major Vietminh assault at Nglia Lo and then attacked Hoa Binh to open up communications on the Black River and thrust into the Viet Bac itself. In bloody and inconclusive fighting between November 1951 and January 1952, the French were forced to withdraw to the de Lattre line. Several things became clear at Hoa Binh. First, Chinese supplies made Vietminh regular divisions comparable to the French in infantry weapons, artillery and mortars.

Any remaining French superiority lay in airpower, armor and naval strength -- all limited by range or terrain. Secondly, VPA units, under certain circumstances, again could fight sustained engagements.

De Lattre returned to France at the outset of the Hoa Binh operation and died of cancer on January 11, 1952; his only child, a French Army lieutenant, had been killed in action in Vietnam in May 1951. General Raoul Salan replaced de Lattre and reduced the scale of French offensive operations, while consolidating his positions in the river deltas.

Meanwhile, Giap continued to build up his forces and equip them with Chinese materiel. Significantly, he received large stocks of equipment captured from the Americans in Korea. By the middle of 1952, his strength had grown to 110,000 regular troops, with another 75,000 men in the regional forces and 120,000 in the village militia.<sup>19</sup> In October 1952, with his forces rebuilt, Giap resumed conventional attacks against Ngliá Lo and other French garrisons on the ridge line between the Red and Black Rivers.

Fearing that a defeat here would imperil their position in the Red River delta, the French launched a major operation to penetrate the Viet Bac, threaten Vietminh supply routes from China, and force them to defend their rear areas and lines of communications. "Operation Lorraine" began on October 29, 1952 with 30,000 troops, the largest French force ever assembled in Indochina for a single operation.<sup>20</sup> By November 7 the



French occupied about 500 square miles of enemy territory, but Vietminh pressure against the delta continued. On November 14, having failed to force a retreat of Vietminh forces from their positions around the delta, the French once again withdrew behind the de Lattre Line. The last deep French penetration of Communist territory cost them 1,200 men, and achieved negligible results.<sup>21</sup>

From this point until 1954 only small-scale combat occurred in the north. Strong French positions in the Red River delta could not be dislodged, but they possessed neither the troops nor the military intelligence to locate Vietminh formations in the Viet Bac. Giap held his forces in the highlands between the Red and Black Rivers and exerted pressure against Laos. Salan, on the other hand, launched spoiling attacks in the north and attempted clearing operations in Annam and the Mekong delta with some success.

By April 1953 Vietminh pressure against Laos forced Salan to rush reinforcements to the area. Giap withdrew after forcing the French to react, but clearly the Vietminh possessed the initiative throughout Indochina. Salan, thoroughly discredited, was replaced by the able but unimaginative General Henri-Eugene Navarre on May 8, 1953. The new commander's review of the military situation indicated that he was relatively secure in the Mekong area, and that the French maintained effective control of the major Annamese cities. The position in Tonkin, however, was poor. Most of his 175,000 regular troops manned the static

de Lattre Line, leaving only seven mobile groups and eight airborne battalions for offensive operations.<sup>22</sup> In contrast, Giap's forces now numbered 125,000 regular troops, 75,000 regional troops, and 225,000 in the militia. Ominously, French intelligence reported that Giap had infiltrated three regiments within the de Lattre Line.<sup>23</sup>

The French now decided on a military strategy called the Navarre Plan which sought to conserve French military strength. Laos would be defended if possible, but the majority of French forces would remain behind the de Lattre Line. Here they would build a mobile force of six to seven divisions. Bao Dai's Vietnamese army would be trained for static defense, thus freeing French units for offensive operations. Navarre expected to conduct deep penetration raids into enemy rear areas in 1954-55 and destroy their regular forces. The Navarre Plan assumed that the French could retain political and military control in Indochina and deflect growing Vietminh power long enough to allow Navarre to build his forces. For the French, hamstrung by shortages of men and materiel, time was the scarcest commodity of all.

Clearly, by late 1953 time was running out for the French in Indochina. Domestic political opposition to the war increased in France, and French military authorities had trouble justifying reinforcements for Indochina in light of their growing NATO commitment. The French political position grew

increasingly untenable. Paris' refusal to grant independence to the Indochinese states negated its attempts to foster alternative governments to the communists. In the end, the French made concessions in the hope of salvaging at least some influence from the disintegrating situation. Unfortunately, by 1953 these concessions came too late to garner any meaningful support from the Indochinese. Both communists and non-communist alike sensed that a French defeat was close at hand; thus, the struggle continued.

On July 6, 1953, the puppet Laotian and Vietnamese governments accepted a French proposal for increased autonomy; in October, Cambodia accepted a proposal for almost complete independence. In November, Paris announced its willingness to accept an honorable solution to the war and did not insist on the unconditional surrender of the Vietminh. To the communists, however, these statements indicated France was grasping at straws; the effort to precipitate a final French collapse intensified.

The final act of the Indochina drama opened on November 20, 1953, when the French occupied and fortified the crossroads of Dien Bien Phu in the northern highlands with two objectives in mind. They wanted to protect the northern approaches to Laos, again threatened by Giap's forces, and lure the Vietminh into a set-piece battle where they could be chewed up by superior French firepower. The French chose a position set in a small basin surrounded by steep, heavily wooded hills.

General Christian de Castries, the French commander, believed the surrounding terrain was too rugged to allow the Vietminh to bring up heavy artillery; he felt his own artillery and air support would give him firepower superiority.

By March 1954 the French had committed 15,000 troops to defend the position, supported by twenty-four 105mm guns, four 155mm howitzers, mortars, and ten light tanks.<sup>24</sup> De Castries estimated he could hold the position against attack by up to three Vietminh divisions. Giap, sensing the decisive conventional blow against the French he had so long sought, moved up four divisions and, in a superhuman effort, his troops disassembled over 200 artillery pieces and carried them over the mountains.

Giap prepared well for battle, and on March 13, 1954 his army struck. Three days later they captured the base airfield, after which the French could only be supplied by parachute drops. The fighting became the most bitter and remorseless of the entire war. Vietminh artillery hammered the French night and day, while Vietminh human wave assaults crashed over the French positions and gradually pushed them back.

While the military struggle continued, the French intensified political negotiations with the Vietminh in the hope of settling the Indochina dilemma. Both sides agreed to participate in negotiations in Geneva, Switzerland, beginning in May that would also address the Korean stalemate. The results of Dien Bien Phu were crucial to both sides. The conference

opened on May 7; on that day the starving French garrison ran out of ammunition and was overrun. Of the 15,000 French troops, only 73 escaped. Some 10,000 men, half of them wounded, became prisoners; the rest were killed. The Vietminh lost approximately 25,000 men, but they won a decisive victory in one of history's epic battles.<sup>25</sup>

The surrender of Dien Bien Phu destroyed French political hopes for Indochina. In an armistice signed in Geneva on July 21 the French agreed to withdraw all their troops north of the 17th Parallel, where a cease fire line would be established. The French affirmed the independence of the DRV and granted independence to South Vietnam. The cease fire was to be a prelude to United Nation-supervised elections to reunify Vietnam to be held within two years. Finally, France recognized the independence and neutrality of both Cambodia and Laos. The United States accepted the agreement but refused to sign it, reserving the right to take action should the terms be violated. The first Indochina war was over; the second was about to begin.

### CHAPTER III

#### CONCLUSIONS

The Vietminh victory shocked Western political and military leaders. The French, though weakened by World War II, were still a formidable military power equipped with the latest weapons, yet they were defeated by what many experts considered a third-rate military power operating largely without modern equipment or technology. From the start, the French clearly underestimated the capabilities and determination of their opponents. Some analysts, influenced in part by French performance in World War II, believed they lost not because the Vietminh had gradually developed the ability to stand and fight, but because the French were either incompetent or uncommitted. Many Western military leaders believed the war could have been won if only prosecuted more vigorously.

The Vietminh and other Asians, on the other hand, saw the war as a triumph of Asian nationalism and communist organization. The Chinese and Vietminh experiences indicated to many Western imperialism could be defeated by militarily and economically inferior peoples. The keys to people's war were nationalism and the political, social, and economic grievances of colonial peoples. The communists, because of their opposition to colonialism, a promise of a better life, and superior organizational techniques, excited the nationalistic

fervor of colonial peoples and channeled it into disciplined support of communist leadership appearing to lead the nationalist movement. By presenting themselves to the people as the spearhead of independence and out-organizing their opponents, the communists came to lead the resistance, and thus, the nation itself. With their former colonial masters driven from the country, they then devoted themselves to completing the political, social and economic transition to communism. While both nationalism and socialism were components of the communist-led revolution, the emphasis during the war against the colonial master was clearly on nationalism first, and socialism second.

The French, through economic and political reforms, might have defeated the socialist revolution, but they could not defeat the nationalistic one. The tragedy of the French experience lay in the fact that in 1946-47 a compromise was possible that would have given Indochina independence and still preserve a substantial degree of French influence. But, by denying the main goal of the revolution -- independence -- the French ensured their own defeat and a communist triumph. Any nationalist group dealing with Paris would be viewed by large numbers of Vietnamese as collaborators with the French regime. Hence, the Vietnamese increasingly turned to the Vietminh as the leaders of the revolutionary movement.

Time was the real key to Vietminh success -- time to organize and propagandize the people, build the army and

wear down the enemy in a prolonged war of attrition. The Vietminh gained time by successfully using guerrilla and conventional operations against the French. More importantly, they used political, social and economic action to maintain and expand Vietnamese determination to resist. Ho and the Vietminh capitalized on Vietnamese discontent, and mobilized this "spiritual power" as they sought to stay alive and outlast the French. Because of the strength of Vietnamese nationalism and the resiliency of their organizations, they succeeded.

The central importance of nationalism to the Vietminh victory escaped both French and American leaders. In the late 1950s, the United States increasingly supported the non-communist regime in the south against hostile activity sponsored by the DRV. American policy, fixed by the idea of containment and a fear of the inexorable spread of communism, moved to establish South Vietnam as a bastion of freedom. American leaders, even more so than the French, viewed the problem in the south as stemming from the fact that the DRV was a communist state, rather than a communist and nationalist state. President Eisenhower clearly indicated the American concern over communism: "We must inform these people (the South Vietnamese) of what is happening and how important it is to get them on our side. They they will want to choose victory."<sup>26</sup> Americans saw the central issue as a choice between communism and freedom. The Vietminh claimed the question was one of either national independence or the



substitution of American for French colonial control. For the Vietminh after 1954 only the opponent changed, not the goals or methods.

Western analysts also struggled with the military results of the war. A mechanized, heavily armed and technologically superior army had been fought to a standstill by terrain, enemy determination and substantial outside aid. Despite their numerous material advantages the French had failed at the most basic military task, to find and fix the enemy. The "lessons", so clear in 1945 -- the superiority of technology and a strong industrial base in fighting a sustained war of attrition -- were called into question by the French experience. Though a reluctant America, afraid of communist expansion, supported the French effort in Indochina, she feared escalation, the possibility of widening the war by involving the People's Republic of China, and the risk of a nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union. Accordingly, the United States pressed the French to limit the scope and intensity of the war. In the new age of limited war, situations still existed where weaker power enjoyed advantages in a military confrontation.

Perhaps most important, the Indochina war shed light on political objectives and the will of nations to accomplish them through armed struggle. World War II seemed to indicate that national will could only be broken through the devastation

of the enemy's economy and society. Yet, after nine years, 140,000 casualties, and the expenditure of eleven billion dollars -- small costs by World War II standards -- the French sickened of the war and gave up.<sup>27</sup> The Vietnamese fought on, motivated by nationalism, organization and fear of Vietminh reprisals if they did not. Military superiority in firepower, equipment and technology was decisively affected by the national will to use that superiority. In a war of attrition limited by objectives and the fear of nuclear war, victory was, in the end, a function not of power but of how much pain a society could withstand -- especially if the war was not considered crucial to national survival. Americans had faced this dilemma on the wind-swept hills of Korea; they were soon to face it again in the skies and steaming jungles of Indochina.

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