



## Peoples and populations in the conduct of war, a historical-military approach 1/4

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**Saint-Cyrien, government adviser for Defence, Lieutenant General Michel Grintchenko was Chief of Staff of UNIFIL in Lebanon from 2015 to 2016. He holds a doctorate in history, and in 2003, under the direction of by Hervé Coutau-Bégarie, a doctoral thesis on the Atlantean operation conducted in Indochina in 1954. This major operation lasting more than six months involved nearly 20,000 fighters. It's very instructive, particularly on the mechanisms of conquest and pacification.**

War in the midst of populations, for those who do not want to ignore them, requires the setting up of civil-military structures to best coordinate actions between the different authorities. War in the midst of peoples is part of a historical dynamic that in some cases endows them with a collective intelligence that makes them major actors in the conflict. In order to make military action among peoples more effective, it is necessary to start from the political level and acquire the means to synchronise civil and military action, with the aim of establishing a comprehensive and coherent political solution. Despite the structures in place and the mechanisms developed, such an organization does not exist and must be created to oppose a unified, much more coherent enemy.

Few campaigns oppose only two armies against each other. The Pacific War between the Americans and the Japanese during the Second World War is one of the rare examples of two armies killing each other in a vacuum, unleashing the worst atrocities, far from any witnesses.

People are never strangers to war; they share the pain and the consequences. In fact, they are often a major player in the war. For Western armies, all imbued today with the principle of conquest of hearts and counter-insurgency, it is necessary to prevent the enemy from feeling at ease, to flush out and destroy him where weapons can speak. Humanists would like to see the population as a brake on unjustified violence, making it

possible to arm a media campaign in the event of a skid. The US military's setbacks in Vietnam are a reminder of the extent to which an army deprived of the support of its own population can then fall into disarray, if not militarily, then at least politically.

For armies that do not share these principles, populations are an input into the power equation, which can be taken into account. The presence of the population in Grosny had little impact on the intensity of the bombing by the Russian army charged with liberating the city in 1995. Many civilians were buried under the rubble of the Chechen capital, putting an end to the principle of using civilians as human shields. In other cases, populations can be a source of power, capable of multiplying the action of forces. In 1954, Ho Chin Minh's army would not have triumphed at Diên Biên Phu without the 70,000 coolies requisitioned to bring the logistics on men's backs or on bicycles, thwarting the analyses of the French intelligence services. The latter considered that it was impossible for the Viet Minh to have such power in this place, since the logistical routes were almost non-existent. The requisition of the local population decided otherwise.

The relationship between the population and the armies and the use that each can make of them influence the conditions of confrontation. Anyone who ignores or uses the population for his own benefit seems to have a real advantage over those who want to preserve it and allow it to live. But this is only a short-term advantage, especially if one includes the notion of a people, whose reality is part of a historical dynamic. In the long term, an advantage that an army could obtain by imposing itself brutally does not last, often generating a future that is much more difficult to manage, since injustice and violence generate revolt and resistance.

Population and people, two concepts that are not interchangeable for a soldier, who has every interest in understanding their subtleties. We will first detail this aspect before looking at a concrete example of civilian-military interaction during the Indochina war. Finally, we will discuss how to make war more effective among peoples.

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