



## Peoples and Populations in The Conduct of War, a Historical-Military Approach 3/4

War Among the Peoples: Example of Operation Atlante - Revue militaire générale n°55

Le général de corps d'armée Michel GRINTCHENKO

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Histoire & stratégie

**The Atlantean operation, occupies a singular place in the Indochina war. Launched in 1954, it was the first phase of the Navarre plan that was to enable France to find an honourable way out of a conflict that had lasted too long. In six months of campaigning, Atlante had to reconquer the Lien Khu V, a region located in the Centre Annam between Nha Trang and Tourane (now Da Nang). Populated by two million people, this region had been administered by the Viet Minh since 1945.**

For the troops of the French Union, it was a question of destroying this centre of enemy resistance and engaging the very young Vietnamese army in the reconquest of its own soil by allowing the Vietnamese administration to establish itself in the wake of the troops. Atlante represents a complex operation, coordinating military, civil and political actions. It calls for comprehensive economic mechanisms aimed in particular at restoring trade and stabilising the currency. It also allows for the conduct of regalian actions, such as the census, the education of children, medical care and the protection of installations through the development of self-defence militias. Finally, it aims to eradicate the Vietnamese presence by erasing all traces of its army and administration.

Atlante proceeds in two phases: conquest and pacification which are based on very different mechanisms.

The conquest aims to seize the area and destroy the enemy's combat potential. It is on the high spectrum of violence and requires robust units all oriented towards war action. These units maintain very limited links with the population for reasons of fear on the one hand and protection and fluidity on the other.

Pacification rests on a much longer period of time, during which many links will be sought with the population to reassure, assist and support them and to obtain from them all the information necessary to extricate the enemy from the area. This then requires hiring other specialized units that have to be recruited, screened and trained.

More than the conquest of a territory, the stake of Atlante was indeed that of the people.

It is a timeless trait that can be found in many other conflicts, such as in Afghanistan or today in Mali: to find how an army can reconquer a people.

First of all, it is necessary to protect it. In order not to dilute its means of guarding more and more sites, the best thing to do is to destroy, or at worst, neutralize the adversary's combat potential. Easy to say, much more complex to achieve! Protection involves deploying posts, guard towers and units deployed as close as possible to the people. This fixed network is then completed by mobile and dynamic missions made up of patrols, reconnaissance and ambushes left on routes frequented by the enemy. Every day, the forces have to get to work so that the enemy does not relocate at night to his former sanctuaries.

It is then necessary to eradicate the enemy's networks and infrastructure. Indeed, every combat unit must have zones of impunity where it can hide to escape its pursuers, find food, water, ammunition, something to treat its wounded and coordinate with other units. Finding and destroying this network of caches requires a lot of energy and troops.

In order to weaken the enemy, it is also necessary to strike a blow at the enemy's camp, by lending a hand in the areas dear to him, to show him that there is no such thing as impunity and that not all rallying to him is synonymous with security and peace. All this requires special units, such as commandoes.

Historical research shows that in this type of conflict, almost 80 per cent of the population is neutral, only asking to switch to one side or another, provided that it gains security and prosperity. The enemy, however, is squaring this population. He keeps them under pressure by indoctrinating them and forcing their authority, by assassinating the notables who have rallied, collecting their taxes and enforcing their justice, most often at night.

The ultimate goal of pacification is to rally people, i.e. to turn them into pro-active supporters. The mechanism of rallying is at the heart of it. To rally, one must be attractive and make people adhere: to show that the cause is just, that life is better and to make people believe in the inevitable victory. We must never lose sight of the fact that this choice is almost irreversible, because the rallying party has condemned itself to death vis-à-vis the enemy, itself and its family. Pacification therefore admits no turning back, no abandonment, no change of course. It is a mode of action with very far-reaching consequences that requires solid political guarantees. Going back on one's word is betrayal, because we cannot play with the lives of those who trust us. This is a fundamental point which largely explains the attitude of a section of the French army which refused a second abandonment during the Algerian war.

Among the technical modalities, one of the key questions is how to be sure of the sincerity of the rally and how to flush out infiltrated agents. At Atlante, a transit centre was specially created to assess the sincerity of the rally. At the end of the process, the suspect could be interned, released into civilian life, or incorporated into a surrogate unit. The process seems simple, but it is all done! This was the major role of the civilian agents, selected for their probity and perfectly trained. The provincial governors benefited from adapted units, the GAMOs (Groupes Administratifs Mobiles Opérationnels), trained for nearly a year in an adapted school. These units were made up of administrative, medical, teaching and investigating police officers, particularly for conducting interrogations. It was a world of professionals whose combined skills made it possible to start a quality administration with integrity and loyalty. The success was so great that the ten GAMOs trained were clearly insufficient.

The next ones were put on the job, leading to the mowing of some provinces in order;

deplorable effects, more effective for the Viêt-minh than its own propaganda  
! A pacification operation cannot be improvised.

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**Title :** Le général de corps d'armée Michel GRINTCHENKO  
**Author (s) :** Le général de corps d'armée Michel GRINTCHENKO  
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