



## War by proxy: the use of the Hmong ethnic group in the wars of Indochina

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Corentin Curtenelle plunges us into a war in which the French and the Americans are wondering what levers should be used to enable them to win their war among the people of Southeast Asia. It is the new context (geographical, human, political) for these two great victorious powers of the Second World War, which prompts them to develop a kind of "laboratory" at the centre of which are the Hmong tribes. For some it is the discovery and for others the rediscovery, of war among peoples, but with little final success for resolutely different reasons.

In 1945, on landing in Indochina, the French Expeditionary Force in the Far East (CEFEO) discovered an unexpected environment. As it was preparing to fight against the Japanese army - a conventional enemy - it was confronted with a guerrilla movement, the Viet Minh, against which the power of a mechanised corps that had proved its worth in Europe, quickly proved ineffective in this new theatre of operations. Moreover, this conflict is not only military, but has a political aspect. The French are rediscovering war in the midst of the people and all the interest of finding local support to defeat an environment that is almost unknown to them. It is the same analysis that the Americans are making during the conflict in Vietnam. They too are searching for an alternative "recipe" to counter guerrilla methods. Paris and Washington chose the option of relying on allies dependent on

unconventional armies. In Indochina, and later during the conflict in Vietnam, the local tribes who spontaneously opposed the Viet Minh appeared to be a reliable solution that could lead to success. Among these multiple ethnic groups, one stands out for its devotion to Western forces: the Hmong ethnic group.

During the communist advance, several Hmong villages spontaneously opposed the Viet Minh.<sup>1</sup> This resistance is an asset for the French and for the Americans. Moreover, after France's withdrawal, Washington continues to support these tribes, especially during a conflict parallel to the Vietnam War: the civil war in Laos. In both cases, this resistance appears to be an opportunity, but by no means a guarantee of success. It was therefore agreed to come to the aid of "the mountain people". The French and American intelligence services successively trained and supervised the Hmong maquis for political and military purposes.

### **A precious ally**

Hardiness and knowledge of the terrain make the Hmong particularly effective allies.

A counter-guerrilla weapon for France

These maquis were created in 1950 to respond to the growing threat from the Viet Minh. Indeed, thanks to the support of the People's Republic of China, Ho Chi Minh and Giap<sup>2</sup> are launching a major offensive. But this advance weakens their backs and leads them to the need to control populations resistant to the communist ideology. From then on, a resistance is organized among these peoples. In order to support these movements, France contacted the tribal chiefs who wished to receive aid. It is the Service de Documentation Extérieure et de Contre-Espionnage (SDECE) and its "Action" department that is in charge of supervising these new resistance networks. Indeed, the tactics of the guerrillas are not unknown to the Service. Its managers are even familiar with these techniques. Trained by the British, they were parachuted behind German lines during the Second World War and it was they who led the French resistance networks. Under the term "Groupement de Commandos Mixtes Aéroportés" (Mixed Airborne Commandos Group)<sup>3</sup> (GCMA), France forms a counter-guerrilla. Within these units, the Hmongs were responsible for countering the actions of the Viet Minh in the mountainous regions.

Once implanted, the GCMA receive three types of missions. The first is to provide information. It is perfectly suited to these irregular soldiers. Thanks to these maquis and the listening networks, France will never have been as well informed about its enemy as during the Indochina war.<sup>4</sup> The second mission of the maquis is to create a permanent insecurity on the rear of the Viet Minh troops. Here again, these light, discreet and highly mobile troops excel in this area. Ambushes set up have strong psychological consequences on Giap's troops. Finally, the GCMA must rally the native populations to France. To achieve this, the French agents will set up a counter-propaganda emphasizing the colonizing character of the Viet Minh and highlighting the hatred that exists between the Hmongs and the Annamites. This is a complex exercise that consists of both knowing the history of the peoples and being diplomatic.

Operation Forget-me-not, from 27 to 31 May 1953, is an example of success. The action of the Hmongs during this operation was praised, in particular, by General Salan.<sup>5</sup> In the course of the action, the maquis inherit secondary missions, guiding and improving the safety of the communication axes and flanks. The Hmongs carry out missions in addition to the main action in the following circumstances<sup>6</sup>. The exercise is difficult because it

requires, in a constrained geographical space, a perfect coordination with the regular forces, as only they possess the firepower necessary to destroy the enemy. Unfortunately, this type of intervention does not become widespread and is effective too late to change the course of the war. However, the effectiveness of these maquis was sufficiently convincing to be exploited by the Americans as soon as the French withdrew.

**1** Opposition that can be explained, in part, by the conflicts between the Annamites, the peoples of the plains that make up the Viet Minh, and the mountain Hmong.

**2** Ho Chi Minh is the political leader of the Viet-minh, Giap is in charge of the armed forces.

**3** Order of General De Lattre de Tassigny, Decision No. 174 CAB/MIL/ED, 1950.

**4** Lieutenant-Colonel Michel David: 'Secret War in Indochina: the indigenous maquis facing the Vietnminh (1950-1955)', Limoges, Lavauzelle Graphic Edition, 2004, p. 329.

**5** "The Battle of Tranninh", Tropiques n° 355, October 1953.

**6** Card of the 3rd FTL Bureau, October 1953, unsigned, SHAT 10H1632.

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