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## **Was America close to victory in Vietnam? The 1969 crisis of the Communist Insurgents from the perspective of the Military Attaché's Office at the Embassy of the Polish People's Republic in Hanoi\***

The aim of this article was to discuss the difficulties that were encountered by the National Liberation Front (NLF) of South Vietnam in 1969 after the fiasco of the communist Tet Offensive<sup>1</sup> in the first months of 1968. The NLF sustained heavy losses during a failed attack on South Vietnamese cities, and its operations were thwarted by the Vietnamization strategy introduced by the new administration of President Richard Nixon<sup>2</sup>. These events are discussed based on an analysis of the reports forwarded by the Military Attaché's Office at the Embassy of the Polish People's Republic (PPR) in Hanoi to the Second Department of the General Staff of the Polish Army. The reports are currently stored in the Archive of the Institute of National Remembrance in Warsaw.

These issues have not been extensively examined in the literature, and the cited reports, despite their considerable value, were not accessible to English-speaking historians who set the tone of research on the Second Indochina War. Therefore, the intelligence

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<sup>1</sup> For a succinct description of the Tet Offensive and its direct consequences, refer to: P. Benken, *Ofensywa Tet 1968. Studium militarno-polityczne*, Szczecin 2014.

<sup>2</sup> For more information about military operations in South Vietnam after the Tet Offensive and changes in the US strategy concerning the Vietnam war, refer to: D.L. Anderson, *Vietnamization. Politics, strategy, legacy*, Lanham 2020; G.A. Cosmas, *MACV: The joint command in the years of withdrawal, 1968–1973*, Washington 2006; M. Hastings, *Wietnam. Epicka tragedia 1945–1975*, Kraków 2021, pp. 713–719; G. Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, New York 1978, pp. 127–189; R.D. Schulzinger, *Wojna w Wietnamie 1941–1975*, Kraków 2020, pp. 396–410; *Vietnam chronicles. The Abrams tapes, 1968–1972*, ed. L. Sorley, Lubbock 2004.

efforts of the Military Attaché's Office of Polish Embassy in Hanoi deserve at least a rudimentary analysis because they shed more light on the conflict in Vietnam. The cited documents are particularly valuable because they fill in the knowledge gap resulting from the unavailability of reliable North Vietnamese source materials<sup>3</sup>.

The article covers a period during which the Military Attaché's Office of Polish Embassy in Hanoi developed a series of highly interesting reports on the setbacks experienced by the NLF in 1969. According to the reports' authors, the NLF's progress had been thwarted by the Tet Offensive and the strategies implemented by the US government after the campaign (rural pacification program and the Vietnamization policy). These trends were also visible in 1970–1971, but the 1970 Cambodian 'incursion' staged by the US and South Vietnamese forces, the South Vietnamese invasion of Laos in 1971, and the reconstruction of the communist army's military potential in 1968–1969, directed against the Republic of Vietnam (RV), changed the dynamics of the Second Indochina War and deserve a separate analysis.

The article relies on selected, most valuable source documents, excluding standard reports that were developed by the Military Attaché's Office based on the official data provided by North Vietnam. North Vietnamese reports were heavily tinted with political propaganda, and most of them contained information that was widely available in Polish military press at the time<sup>4</sup>. The article does not discuss the internal, highly interesting, affairs of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) or the Chinese-Soviet conflict. These events influenced the military capabilities of the NLF/People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) in South Vietnam, but they have been analyzed in detail in a previous article<sup>5</sup>.

The analyzed reports are particularly valuable because North Vietnam's stance on the Second Indochina War continues to pose the greatest challenge for historians analyzing this conflict. In addition, 1969 was a year of transition in the Vietnam War which

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<sup>3</sup> For more information, refer to: P. Benken, *Archiwum Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej jako narzędzie do badań wojen i konfliktów zbrojnych po 1945 roku na przykładzie II wojny indochińskiej*, [in:] *Wojny i konflikty zbrojne po 1945 roku. Zbiór studiów*, eds. M. Giętkowski, Ł. Nadolski, vol. IV, Bydgoszcz 2017, pp. 149–167; K. Sacewicz, *Zanim była Ofensywa Tet. Sytuacja operacyjna wojsk amerykańskich i sojusznicznych w Wietnamie Południowym w 1967 r. i jej wpływ na walki w dolinie Dak To w świetle materiałów Zarządu II Sztabu Generalnego Wojska Polskiego. Krytyka źródła*, "Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość" 2019, no. 2(34), pp. 366–410.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. P. Benken, *Relacje z „frontu walki z amerykańskim imperializmem”. II wojna indochińska na łamach „Żołnierza Wolności” w latach 1965–1969*, [in:] *Prasa oficjalna w PRL*, eds. R. Łatka, S. Ligarski, Warszawa 2020, pp. 269–306.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. idem, „Lepsza wojna”? *Konflikt w Indochinach w latach 1968–1970 z perspektywy Attachatu Wojskowego przy Ambasadzie Polskiej Rzeczypospolitej Ludowej w Hanoi*, [in:] *Wojny i konflikty zbrojne po 1945 roku, Zbiór studiów*, eds. W. Bartoszek, Ł. Nadolski, vol. VIII, Bydgoszcz 2021, pp. 145–174; idem, *Relacje Demokratycznej Republiki Wietnamu z Chińską Republiką Ludową i Związkiem Socjalistycznych Republik Sowietkich w latach 1969–1971 w kontekście II wojny indochińskiej. Perspektywa attachatu wojskowego przy ambasadzie Polskiej Rzeczypospolitej Ludowej w Hanoi*, "Studia i Materiały Centralnej Biblioteki Wojskowej im. Józefa Piłsudskiego" 2022, no. 2(22), pp. 115–145.

witnessed the famous Battle of Hamburger Hill<sup>6</sup>, protests in the United States, and the beginning of America's political and military withdrawal from the Indochinese peninsula. With the exception of the Vietnamization policy, other events in the RV have received far less attention in the literature.

The debate on whether the military failure and the propaganda success of the Tet Offensive presented Saigon and Washington with an opportunity to win the war, an opportunity that was wasted for political reasons (large number of casualties, high cost of the war, and erosion of public support for the Vietnam War in the US), still continues in the historiography of the Second Indochina War<sup>7</sup>. Researchers hold varying opinions on whether the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) was able to independently fight back the aggression of the NLF<sup>8</sup> and the PAVN, and on the social, political, and economic stability of South Vietnam in the late 1960s and in the first half of the 1970s.

The following research hypothesis was formulated based on an analysis of the reports forwarded by the Military Attaché's Office at the Republic of the PPR in Hanoi (as well as other source materials and the literature): by 1969, the situation in the RV had improved to an extent which enabled the US to cede responsibility for the war to the ARVN and gradually remove its troops from South Vietnam. The NLF had sustained massive losses during the offensive campaign of 1968–1969; the DRV was severely weakened by recent bombardments, and the communist forces were unable to counteract these measures because they needed time to rebuild their military potential with the support of the People's Republic of China, the USSR and its satellite states. Nonetheless, the social and political situation in the RV and the US prevented Saigon from stabilizing South Vietnam, and the US was forced to rapidly retreat from Indochina without providing the US-dependent ally with adequate support to fight for its independence. In view of the above, South Vietnam's military advantage over communist insurgents, particularly noticeable in 1968–1970, proved to be a fleeting success, and it did not change the final outcome of the conflict.

The article is divided into several sections. The introduction is followed by a section discussing the success of the rural pacification program and the and reform, and a section analyzing the reasons for the NLF's military failure in the late 1960s. The article ends with a conclusion section.

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. P. Benken, *Hamburger Hill 1969*, Warszawa 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. G.A. Daddis, *Withdrawal: reassessing America's final years in Vietnam*, New York 2017; L. Sorley, *A better war. The unexamined victories and final tragedy of America's last years in Vietnam*, New York 1999.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. N.Q. Truong, *RVNAF and US operational cooperation and coordination*, Washington 1984; M. Hastings, op. cit., passim; A. Wiest, *Vietnam's forgotten army. Heroism and betrayal in the ARVN*, New York 2008.

### Fiasco of the Tet Offensive and its consequences, the rural pacification program, and the land reform

The US and South Vietnamese armies were in a position to take the initiative after the communist forces had suffered massive losses in the Tet Offensive. Government control was reinstated in some regions of the RV, where communist insurgents had established a strong presence. The number of American troops in the RV peaked in 1969, which contributed to the military progress of the US and its allies. The US was able to allocate more soldiers, supplies, and funds to fighting the weakened insurgent forces. The effectiveness of the military operations initiated by the ARVN increased considerably during and after the Tet Offensive, and ARVN forces were increasingly deployed against the NLF. The South Vietnamese people, including urban residents, who initially had a neutral or negative attitude towards the government in Saigon, turned against the communists after the Tet Offensive, in fear of losing their lives and property to the NLF.

The aim of the pacification program was to eliminate communist influence from rural areas where most of the Vietnamese population resided, and it played a very important role in turning a military victory into a long-term strategic success. To achieve this goal, the residents of areas with a strong communist presence were to be relocated to strategic villages that were created specifically for this purpose. Despite the fact that the rural pacification program had many weaknesses (it failed to attract the support of farmers who were attached to their land and ancestral burial grounds, and it did not prevent communist infiltration of rural areas), the report filed by Colonel Jan Kamela, Military Attaché to the Embassy of the PPR in Hanoi, at the beginning of the 1969, provides the following account of military activity in Vietnam in December 1968:

(...) in South Vietnam, the Americans are relocating the local population to camps [strategic villages] to pave the ground for military operations in endangered regions. As a result, the US troops will be free to attack villages, where insurgent units often take refuge, without attracting criticism from the local inhabitants. The N[atational] L[iberation] F[ront] has been taking only the necessary defensive action to save its troops for the final strike if the Paris talks prove to be unsuccessful<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> The Archive of the Institute of National Remembrance (AINR), 2602/8423, Notatka informacyjna dotycząca działań w Wietnamie w grudniu 1968 r., 8 I 1969, k. 9. The military attaché received information about the situation in the RV from an officer of the Polish Mission to the International Commission of Control and Supervision (ICCS) who visited Hanoi once a month according to the rotation plan. For more information about the intelligence gathering tasks of ICCS officers, see: cf. J. Słowiak, *Działalność polskiego wywiadu wojskowego w ramach Międzynarodowej Komisji Nadzoru i Kontroli w Wietnamie*, [in:] *Studia nad wojnami w Indochinach*, eds. P. Benken, J. Słowiak, vol. V, Zabrze–Tarnowskie Góry 2020, pp. 134–160.

Despite the generally optimistic tone of earlier reports (written in 1968) on the Tet Offensive and its consequences, which were based largely on Vietnamese sources and when the real battlefield situation in South Vietnam was unknown, Colonel Kamela concluded that the communists scored only a partial success in the Tet Offensive. Although the unprecedented attack on South Vietnamese cities staged by the NLF/PAVN came as a blow to the US administration, upset the balance of power in South Vietnam, and received great media coverage around the world, it failed to incite a popular uprising in the RV, which Hanoi was hoping for. Therefore, the communists did not score a decisive victory<sup>10</sup>. In June 1969, Colonel Kamela submitted the following report describing the reasons for and the consequences of the communist forces' failure in the South:

A reasonable strategy had been formulated during military operations, but it failed to bring the anticipated results. The tendency to overestimate own military prowess and underestimate the enemy's forces undermined the effectiveness of patriotic troops [*sic!*] and led to a considerable loss of lives and equipment (as well as civilian casualties). (...) As a result, the patriotic forces were decimated, and the living conditions of the army and the local population deteriorated, which decreased the political morale of the society and the liberation army [*sic!*]. The above factors significantly reduced the army's operational capability and public support for the NLF. (...) Despite the sustained losses, the military capability of the USA and its satellites [*allies*] remains high. The DRV and the NLF would find themselves in a highly precarious situation if the USA and its allies were to fully deploy their capabilities<sup>11</sup>.

The military attaché's assessment is noteworthy because it painted a completely different picture than that presented in the official reports from the DRV and its allies. Colonel Kamela was more critical of the NLF than some authors of contemporary and present-day publications written in English, and the last sentence of the cited paragraph indicates that the USA and South Vietnam could gain advantage in the war, which previously seemed impossible. The report not only describes the losses sustained by the NLF during the Tet Offensive, but it also informs about the decline in the members' morale. In addition to the military operations staged by US and South Vietnamese troops and the bombardment of North Vietnamese supply routes<sup>12</sup>, the drop in morale significantly

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<sup>10</sup> AINR, 2602/8423, Notatka informacyjna dotycząca niektórych aspektów sytuacji i działań wojennych w Wietnamie Południowym, 6 II 1969, col. 97. Cf. P. Benken, *Ofensywa Tet 1968 w dokumentach Attachatu Wojskowego przy Ambasadzie PRL w Hanoi w latach 1968–1969*, [in:] *Studia nad wojnami w Indochinach*, ed. P. Benken, vol. I, Oświęcim 2013, pp. 66–78.

<sup>11</sup> AINR, 2602/8423, Notatka informacyjna dotycząca okólnego pisma Biura Politycznego Komitetu Centralnego Wietnamskiej Partii Pracujących w sprawie przystąpienia DRW i FWN do rozmów paryskich, 17 VI 1969, col. 321.

<sup>12</sup> According to the Polish military attaché in Hanoi, the Communists sustained considerable losses when troops and equipment when transported to the South via the Ho Chi Minh trail. According to estimates, the

weakened communist forces in the South in 1968–1970. After the Tet Offensive, the NLF was unable to fully rebuild its military capability, and in the following years, it had to receive substantial support from the PAVN. However, the process of training and transporting military troops to South Vietnam was a lengthy operation<sup>13</sup>.

In the 1969 annual report developed by the Military Attaché's Office at the Embassy of the PPR in Hanoi, Lieutenant Colonel Ryszard Kamiński (who replaced Colonel Kame-la) noted that insurgent activities were less extensive and dynamic in the first months of 1969 than during the Tet Offensive, and failed to produce the anticipated results:

The American army and regime troops were able to localize the NLF's forces, and they initiated a series of operations to eliminate them. The offensive staged by the NLF had considerable political implications by demonstrating that the Front was capable of orchestrating a large-scale military campaign. However, the military effectiveness of the campaign was low. The campaign inflicted considerable damage on the enemy, but the NLF sustained even greater losses. The offensive undermined the strength and the reserves of patriotic forces which had to be replenished. This fact significantly affected the course of military operations in the following months<sup>14</sup>.

It should be noted that the military team of the Polish Mission to the International Commission of Control and Supervision (ICCS) in Vietnam provided a different account of the situation. In an analytical report of June 1969, the Polish Mission stated that the temporary setbacks experienced by the NLF were not caused by heavy losses during and after the Tet Offensive, but by the fact that smaller military units were easier to deploy and were more effective in inflicting damage on the enemy. The report posited that these setbacks could be also attributed to the peace negotiations between Hanoi and the US government in Paris. According to ICCS officers, the communists had a strong strategic reserve formation that consisted of regular NLF troops in safe areas along Cambodian and Laotian borders:

(...) Regular NLF troops were still stationed on the territory of Laos and Cambodia. (...) In large part, regular NLF troops acted as a strategic reserve and a training base for the insurgents. In general, the NLF (...) remained active, and it was able to launch large-scale

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US deployed 40% of B-52 strategic bombers in Indochina to destroy the NLF infrastructure in south-east Laos – AINR, 2602/9317, Sprawozdanie z pracy zespołu wojskowego w Polskiej Delegacji do Międzynarodowej Komisji Nadzoru i Kontroli w Wietnamie w okresie marzec – początek czerwca 1969 r., 28 VI 1969, k. 81.

<sup>13</sup> For more information about the losses sustained by the NLF in the Tet Offensive, refer to: P. Ostaszewski, *Wietnam. Najdłuższy konflikt powojennego świata 1945–1975*, Warszawa 2000, pp. 458, 463, 469, 495.

<sup>14</sup> AINR, 2602/8424, Sprawozdanie z działalności Attachatu Wojskowego przy Ambasadzie PRL za rok 1969, 12 XI 1969, k. 100.

attacks without depleting its reserve forces. These operations not only strengthened the NLF's position during Paris talks, but they also manifested its [NLF's] military power to the people of South Vietnam<sup>15</sup>.

In the following months of 1969, the Military Attaché's Office at the Embassy of the PPR in Hanoi gradually became aware of the full scale of the crisis that had affected the NLF after the failed military operations in early 1968. Lieutenant Colonel Kamiński reported that military activity in the RV had been largely halted in August and September. The temporary lull in operations was attributed to the depletion of the NLF's forces during the offensive in the South in 1968 and the loss of soldiers and supplies at the beginning of 1969. Due to American air attacks, the process of transporting new troops and supplies would take several months<sup>16</sup>.

Lieutenant Colonel Kamiński pointed out that the insurgents' situation deteriorated significantly as the result of the pacification campaign which had been launched by Saigon and Washington to win the support of rural residents and which gained speed in the second half of 1969:

The pacification campaign was launched in all regions of South Vietnam with the aim of eliminating patriotic troops and insurgents, and halting mass mobilization efforts (communist militia in villages). In the next stage, the locals will be subjected to a propaganda campaign involving radio programs, lectures, distribution of attractive gifts (radios, underwear, writing utensils) and, in many cases, the initial stages of the land reform. The pacification program is conducted by the military, propaganda experts, and representatives of the Saigon government. It is likely that these measures will bring the desired outcome. Many high-ranking officials in Hanoi believe that the imperialists will be successful in brainwashing and winning over less politically conscious individuals<sup>17</sup>.

A similar opinion was voiced by the officers of the Polish Mission to the ICCS in Vietnam:

An article published in the *Stars and Stripes* which alleges that for every [Vietnamese] soldier who died from an American bullet, there will be half a dozen of family members who would vote for the NLF, best sums up the situation. As a result, the Thieu regime has

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<sup>15</sup> AINR, 2602/9317, Sprawozdanie z pracy zespołu wojskowego w Polskiej Delegacji do Międzynarodowej Komisji Nadzoru i Kontroli w Wietnamie w okresie marzec – początek czerwca 1969 r., 28 VI 1969, kar. 82. Cf. M. Hastings, op. cit., pp. 678–679.

<sup>16</sup> AINR, 2602/8423, Notatka informacyjna dotycząca oceny działań wojennych w Wietnamie w sierpniu i wrześniu 1969 r., 21 X 1969, kar. 495.

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem, kar. 498–499.

made every effort to solicit civilian support, and the pacification program has been largely implemented for this purpose<sup>18</sup>.

According to Lieutenant Colonel Kamiński, the Americans were hoping to achieve two main goals. The first was to eliminate the influence of the NLF in rural areas (and to physically eliminate the insurgents and their supporters) and “brainwash” the local population. The second goal was to eliminate NLF soldiers, damage military equipment, prevent the enemy from maneuvering, block supply chains, and decrease the enemy’s potential to stage counterattacks. The latter was to be achieved by deploying smaller units (to minimize own losses which became an increasing political problem for Washington), but with greater force and with substantial support from the air force and the artillery<sup>19</sup>.

The land reform, which was much anticipated by the rural residents of the RV, significantly increased public support for the Saigon government<sup>20</sup>. In a report describing military activity in Vietnam in October and November 1969, Lieutenant Colonel Kamiński wrote:

The pacification program covers nearly all of South Vietnam, excluding mountainous areas along the border which are difficult to access. Between 5 and 15 October, 82 pacification operations were staged in the province of Ben Tre alone. The scope of the land reform was expanded in the discussed period. The redistribution of land to peasants is a propaganda measure that elicits the desired public response. In pacified regions, the distribution of land and gifts has increased public support for the regime and the US<sup>21</sup>.

Perhaps, the Second Indochina War would have taken a different course if these solutions had been implemented earlier and with greater consistency. The land reform was probably the Saigon government’s only option of gaining strong support in rural areas and eliminating communist influence. The analyzed reports are a valuable source of information because they indicate that communist influence could have been eradicated and that Saigon had an opportunity to build support among farmers, which would have significantly altered the course of events in the 1960s. These observations undermine

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<sup>18</sup> AINR, 2602/9317, Sprawozdanie z pracy zespołu wojskowego w Polskiej Delegacji do Międzynarodowej Komisji Nadzoru i Kontroli w Wietnamie w okresie marzec – początek czerwca 1969 r., 28 VI 1969 r., 81.

<sup>19</sup> AINR, 2602/8423, Notatka informacyjna dotycząca oceny działań wojennych w Wietnamie w sierpniu i wrześniu 1969 r., 21 X 1969, k. 499.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. R. Thompson, *Stany Zjednoczone wobec problemu pacyfikacji Republiki Wietnamu*, [in:] *Studia nad wojnami w Indochinach*, eds. P. Benken, J. Słowiak, vol. II, Zabrze–Tarnowskie Góry 2014, pp. 115–119; P. Ostaszewski, op. cit., pp. 459, 496.

<sup>21</sup> AINR, 2602/8423, Notatka informacyjna dotycząca działań wojennych w Wietnamie w październiku i listopadzie 1969 r., 10 XII 1969, p. 538.



the deterministic view postulating that the fall of the RV and the communist triumph in Indochina were inevitable and that American involvement in Vietnam only stalled this process. Saigon and Washington were definitely not doomed to failure in the Second Indochina War, especially since Hanoi was faced with its own share of serious problems. These facts became blatantly obvious in 1969.

### Vietnamization

In April 1969, the Military Attaché's Office at the Embassy of the PPR in Hanoi reported:

In South Vietnam, the Americans are reinforcing the Saigon army and conducting the so-called accelerated pacification campaign. They are hoping that a strengthened Saigon regime will be able to effectively counteract the NLF if American forces withdraw from South Vietnam<sup>22</sup>.

These operations proved to be successful, and in late 1969, Lieutenant Colonel Kamiński forwarded the following report:

In recent months, the NLF's regular troops fell back to a defensive position and retreated to mountainous areas along the border or to Cambodia and Laos. The enemy has gained air supremacy, and it is not only able to conduct reconnaissance missions, but also neutralize and destroy the identified targets. Terrestrial supremacy has enabled the enemy to eliminate the insurgents and the few remaining liberation troops that had managed to infiltrate the plains or the Mekong delta. Liberation forces had been seriously weakened during three successive offensive campaigns in 1968 and in the winter of 1969. They have been deprived of maneuverability and operational capacity, and their activities are limited to diversion, reconnaissance, and guerilla tactics<sup>23</sup>.

The military attaché of the PPR in Hanoi reported on the strategic failure of communist forces which, at the end of 1969, attacked the special forces camp in Bu Prang in Quang Duc province close to the Cambodian border:

This fact [decrease in the NLF's military activity] could be explained by the significant concentration of liberation troops in the Bu Prang region, where the Saigon army estab-

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<sup>22</sup> AINR, 2602/8424, Sprawozdanie oficera do zleceń attachatu wojskowego w Hanoi mjr. Henryka Majorczyka z pobytu w Attachacie Wojskowym przy Ambasadzie PRL w Hanoi, 16 IV 1969 r., k. 1.

<sup>23</sup> AINR, 2602/8423, Notatka informacyjna dotycząca działań wojennych w Wietnamie w październiku i listopadzie 1969 r., Hanoi, 10 XII 1969, k. 538.

lished a special forces camp. Special forces were trained, equipped, and supervised by the officers of the [US] 5<sup>th</sup> Special Forces. In addition to conducting reconnaissance and counterintelligence operations, special forces were created to spread defeatism among liberation troops, eliminate military commanders and top political activists. For this reason, the [NLF] command decided to attack the base in Bu Prang despite difficult operating conditions in the region. Our sources suggest that the NLF was unable to score a major success, despite the fact that the element of surprise provided them with a tactical advantage. The enemy transported a large number of troops which blocked the liberation army's advance and inflicted significant damage during air raids<sup>24</sup>.

In the documents forwarded to the Second Department of the General Staff of the Polish Army in 1969, Lieutenant Colonel Kamiński also reported on an increase in the military effectiveness of the ARVN, a topic that had not been widely addressed in the previous reports. In earlier analyses, the NLF's failures were attributed mostly to the activity of American forces. The recognition that the Saigon army had played an important role in thwarting communist insurgents in the South is consistent with the observations made by English-speaking historians who concluded that the Vietnamization campaign, which had been planned in January 1969 and officially implemented several months later, contributed to Saigon's success in the South<sup>25</sup>. According to the Polish military attaché's reports, in the summer and fall of 1969, the US army distributed M16 rifles (to replace the outdated M1 and M14 rifles), artillery pieces, and helicopters to ARVN forces. This operation considerably increased the military capability and morale of ARVN troops, most of which had been previously less well equipped than NLF/PAVN forces. In November 1969, Lieutenant Colonel Kamiński reported on the ARVN's increasing involvement in the fight against the insurgents in the South:

During military raids, land clearing and pacification operations, the Saigon army outnumbered US troops by three to one, or even four to one. The only exception were landing operations, where American forces were clearly more prevalent. The large-scale pacification campaign that was initiated on 30 September in the Quang Ngai – Binh Dinh region [province] is a good example of the above. The operation involved ten infantry battalions, an armored battalion [armored cavalry regiment], and an artillery battery of the Saigon army. Only three battalions from the American 173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Brigade took part in the operations. The commander of the regime's [*sic!*] 22<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Regiment assumed full control over the campaign. In our opinion, the decreasing involvement of US troops did not undermine the campaign's effectiveness (...). It seems that other US infan-

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem, k. 540.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. A. Wiest, op. cit., pp. 177–195.

try units could be safely withdrawn without compromising the effectiveness of military operations. However, the US artillery, air force, logistics units, and airborne brigades are essential for military success<sup>26</sup>.

The reports dispatched from Hanoi to Warsaw also contain information about other military operations that were conducted in September in Binh Long (capital city of Binh Phuoc province) and Phuoc Long. The campaign involved five battalions of the American 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division and ARVN forces, including the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, one battalion of the 7<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, and Army Rangers battalion. Backed by the 11<sup>th</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment of the US army, South Vietnamese forces managed to hold down NLF troops until the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division arrived by air. "This operation inflicted significant damage on patriotic troops and forced them to retreat rapidly"<sup>27</sup>.

Successive reports also painted a more favorable picture of low-ranking soldiers of the ARVN. They were no longer portrayed as demoralized, incompetent, and corrupt individuals who were eager to desert the army. In April 1969, Lieutenant Colonel Kamela wrote:

The average South Vietnamese soldier has built a good reputation in recent years. He demonstrated desirable military traits and always obeyed orders with resolve and courage. The South Vietnamese soldier is a peasant who is accustomed to heavy labor and difficulty, has a practical mindset, and is well versed in the art of combat. (...) As a result, he has a rather fatalistic attitude towards war; he accepts suffering and death with patience and resilience, and assumes a disciplined stance when defeated. On the other hand, he is unable to take initiative in difficult circumstances and is largely reliant on his superiors<sup>28</sup>.

The observations made by Polish officers also strongly undermined the stereotypical belief that South Vietnamese forces were unable to conduct effective military operations on their own. This stereotype is difficult to eradicate and still persists, although a growing number of publications have painted a more accurate picture of the ARVN in recent years<sup>29</sup>. Therefore, the reports developed by the Military Attaché's Office at the Embassy of the PPR in Hanoi are a valuable source of information because their authors had no

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<sup>26</sup> AINR, 2602/8424, Sprawozdanie z działalności Attachatu Wojskowego przy Ambasadzie PRL za rok 1969, 12 XI 1969, k. 102.

<sup>27</sup> AINR, 2602/8423, Ocena działań wojennych w Wietnamie Południowym w sierpniu i wrześniu 1969 r., 21 X 1969, k. 498.f

<sup>28</sup> AINR, 2602/8424, Notatka informacyjna dotycząca sił zbrojnych Południowego Wietnamu opracowana na podstawie materiałów dostarczonych przez oficerów z MKNiK w Sajgonie, 4 VI 1969, k. 372.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. A. Wiest, „Inna wojna” – próba obiektywnej oceny Armii Republiki Wietnamu, [in:] *Studia nad wojnami w Indochinach...*, vol. II, pp. 61–85.

intention of glorifying “puppet” troops, and they relied on “host” sources to describe the ARVN’s achievements. At the beginning of 1970, Lieutenant Colonel Kamiński forwarded a report analyzing military activity in Vietnam in December 1969:

According to the General Staff of the PAVN, the pacification campaign has yielded the anticipated results for the Saigon regime. In consequence, large swathes of land are no longer controlled by the Front [NLF]. The Vietnamization of war is still in full swing. Many pacification and land clearing operations are conducted solely by the regime’s forces under the command of Saigon’s officers. The Saigon army is implementing the tactics devised by [General Creighton] Abrams by concentrating its forces and equipment in selected regions to eliminate liberation troops. A large-scale pacification operation in Cai Be and Cai Lay districts of My Tho province is a good example of the above. The operation involved the following units of the Saigon army: 1<sup>st</sup> Airborne Brigade, 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, two regiments of the 7<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, and four special forces [commando] battalions. The NLF troops are known to initiate military operations in small groups<sup>30</sup>.

The series of military failures in 1968–1969 undermined the position of General Vo Nguyen Giap, the North Vietnamese minister of national defense, who was subject to severe criticism in late 1969 and early 1970. The attack on General Giap, a decorated hero who had besieged the French during the battle of Dien Bien Phu in the First Indochina War, was a part of a factional conflict in the top ranks of the Vietnamese Communist Party which was influenced by the Chinese People’s Republic and the Maoist concept of people’s war. In 1970, Colonel Edward Głąb (who replaced Lieutenant Colonel Kamiński) reported on the charges that had been brought against General Giap:

General Giap endangered the rears by favoring regular military operations over guerilla tactics. Very few efforts were made to encourage political activism at the local level, which prevented the PAVN from garnering support in the field and organizing military outposts in conquered areas. (...) As a result, new military tactics had to be developed. These actions are chiefly responsible for the current decline in the NLF’s activity<sup>31</sup>.

Despite these charges, General Giap was not demoted. The communists were inclined to maintain the appearance of unanimity among high-ranking party officials, and

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<sup>30</sup> AINR, 2602/8902, Notatka informacyjna dotycząca oceny działań wojennych w Wietnamie w grudniu 1969 r. 13 I 1970, k. 11.

<sup>31</sup> AINR, 2602/8889, Sprawozdanie z działalności Attachtatu Wojskowego przy Ambasadzie PRL w Hanoi za rok 1970, 11XI 1970, k. 61.

Giap admitted his mistakes in a lengthy confession, and undertook to abide by the principles of “people’s war” in future decisions<sup>32</sup>.

## Conclusion

Paradoxically, the most effective military operations against the NLF since the beginning of the US intervention in Indochina took place after Washington had decided to pull out from the problematic conflict. Nonetheless, Richard Nixon did not intend to leave South Vietnam to the mercy of the DRV because such a move would humiliate the US in the international arena. The US President was planning to provide the RV with sufficient support to enable South Vietnam to independently fight against communist aggression<sup>33</sup>. The military and political situation in the RV after the Tet Offensive created favorable conditions for implementing this plan and withdrawing American troops from Indochina. It is no accident that in Andy Wiest’s *Vietnam’s forgotten army*, the chapter analyzing the activities of the South Vietnamese army in 1969 was entitled *After Tet: the year of hope*<sup>34</sup>. According to Max Hastings, the author of one of the most recent monographs on the Indochina conflict, the communists ultimately admitted that 1969 was the worst year in the Second Indochina War, during which North Vietnam had suffered the most severe losses and the greatest decline in morale<sup>35</sup>.

The information presented in the reports of the Military Attaché’s Office at the Embassy of the PPR in Hanoi has been validated by recent English-language research, and it indicates that the NLF was unlikely to score a victory against Saigon and Washington unless the military burden were shifted to the PAVN, which took place in the following years. The communists not only suffered a military defeat in the Tet Offensive, but also lost the initiative which fell into the hands of American-South Vietnamese forces. The acceleration of the pacification program, the land reform, and the Vietnamization campaign not only prevented the NLF from staging effective operations, but also decreased civilian support for the communists and strengthened the government in Saigon. These observations suggest that 1968–1970 were lean years for the insurgents. Communist guerrilla forces were substantially weakened, and the offensive campaigns launched in 1972 and 1975 with the aim of dealing the final blow to South Vietnam were limited to conventional operations that involved the PAVN with the support of armored vehicles and artillery units. It should be noted that the military success scored during and after the Tet

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<sup>32</sup> Cf. P. Benken, *Relacje Demokratycznej Republiki Wietnamu...*, p. 138; C.B. Currey, *Victory at any cost. The genius of Viet Nam’s Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap*, Dulles 2005, pp. 273–274; P. Ostaszewski, op. cit., 471.

<sup>33</sup> For more information, refer to: J.H. Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam: how America left and South Vietnam lost its war*, Lawrence 2004.

<sup>34</sup> A. Wiest, *Vietnam’s forgotten army...*, pp. 124–156.

<sup>35</sup> M. Hastings, op. cit., p. 667.

Offensive not only enabled the US to conquer the enemy, but also to withdraw from the RV on “honorable” terms. These events clearly indicate that politics always took precedence over military concerns, and that the interests of the weaker ally were rarely taken into consideration during the Second Indochina War.

As mentioned in the introduction, the debate on whether the US had wasted the opportunity to turn military success into meaningful political gain after the Tet Offensive still continues in American historiography. Max Hastings wrote that according to some historians, the US and its allies had practically won the war by the end of 1970. In his opinion, the US was prevented from taking advantage of its success in the battlefield by the internal crisis in Washington<sup>36</sup>. The presented source materials support the arguments made by some historians (including Lewis Sorley) that Saigon and Washington had emerged as winners in the final years of the war, but they also discuss the problems faced by the US and South Vietnamese troops which, in 1969, were still far from victory in the Second Indochina War. Although the ARVN had improved its operational effectiveness, it was still dependent on air support and military supplies from the US. The campaign of 1975 clearly demonstrated that the ARVN’s military equipment lacking proper maintenance and logistics could not turn the tide of the war. South Vietnam was also economically dependent on the US. Saigon’s inability to break its economic, political, and military dependence from Washington seems to be the main reason why the RV was unable to attract sufficient support from civilians and keep its territory. Once again, success in the battlefield, including large-scale campaigns, was not enough to conquer a strong and determined opponent which had powerful allies and was willing to mobilize all resources to reunify Vietnam under its control, regardless of the cost.

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### **Was America close to victory in Vietnam? The 1969 crisis of the Communist Insurgents from the perspective of the Military Attaché's Office at the Embassy of the Polish People's Republic in Hanoi**

**Summary:** This article discusses the difficulties that were encountered by the National Liberation Front (NLF) of Southern Vietnam in 1969 after the fiasco of the communist Tet Offensive of 1968. These problems were analyzed based on an analysis of the reports forwarded by the Military Attaché's Office at the Embassy of the Polish People's Republic (PPR) in Hanoi to the Second Department of the General Staff of the Polish Army. These issues have not been extensively examined in the literature, and the cited reports, despite their considerable value, were not accessible to English-speaking historians. The debate on whether the military failure and the propaganda success of the Tet Offensive presented Saigon and Washington with an opportunity to win the war, an opportunity that was wasted for political reasons, still continues in the historiography of the Second Indochina War. The analyzed source materials indicate that by 1969, the situation in the Republic of Vietnam (RV) had improved to an extent which enabled the US to cede responsibility for the war to the Army of the RV and to gradually remove its troops from South Vietnam. Nonetheless, the social and political situation in the RV and the US prevented Saigon from stabilizing the situation in South Vietnam, and it forced the US to rapidly retreat from Indochina. As a result, South Vietnam's military advantage over communist insurgents proved to be a fleeting success, and it did not change the final outcome of the conflict.

**Keywords:** Second Indochina War, Tet Offensive, Vietnamization, military intelligence

### **Stand Amerika kurz vor dem Sieg in Vietnam? Die Krise der kommunistischen Partisanenbewegung 1969 aus der Sicht des Militärattachés an der Botschaft der Volksrepublik Polen in Hanoi**

**Zusammenfassung:** Der Artikel behandelt die Schwierigkeiten, mit denen die Nationale Befreiungsfront Südvietnams 1969 nach dem Scheitern der kommunistischen Tet-Offensive von 1968 konfrontiert war, und stützt sich dabei auf die Auswertung von Informationsvermerken, die der Militärattaché der Botschaft der Volksrepublik Polen in Hanoi an das Präsidium II des Generalstabs der polnischen Armee geschickt hat. Die Titelfrage ist in der bestehenden Literatur zu diesem Thema bisher nicht erschöpfend erörtert worden; die zitierten Dokumente waren, trotz ihres Wertes, unter anderem aufgrund der Sprachbarriere



für englischsprachige Historiker unzugänglich. In der Geschichtsschreibung zum Zweiten Indochinakrieg ist nach wie vor umstritten, ob die für die Kommunisten militärisch erfolglose, aber propagandistisch erfolgreiche Tet-Offensive eine große Chance für Saigon und Washington war, einen Sieg zu erringen, die aus politischen Gründen vertan wurde. Aus den analysierten Dokumenten geht hervor, dass sich die Lage der Republik Vietnam 1969 so weit verbessert hat, dass die Amerikaner den vietnamesischen Streitkräften mehr Verantwortung für den Kampf gegen die Kommunisten übertragen und gleichzeitig mit dem Abzug ihrer eigenen Truppen beginnen konnten. Die sich entwickelnde gesellschaftspolitische Situation in der ehemaligen Sowjetunion und in den Vereinigten Staaten erlaubte es Saigon jedoch nicht, Südvietnam ausreichend zu stabilisieren, und zwang Washington zu einem übereilten Rückzug aus Indochina. Die gegen die kommunistische Partisanenbewegung erzielten Erfolge erwiesen sich somit letztlich als nicht nachhaltig und änderten nichts am endgültigen Ausgang des Konflikts.

**Schlüsselwörter:** Zweiter Indochinakrieg, Tet-Offensive, Vietnamisierung, militärischer Geheimdienst

### **Czy Ameryka była bliska zwycięstwa w Wietnamie? Kryzys komunistycznej partyzantki w 1969 roku z perspektywy Attachatu Wojskowego przy Ambasadzie Polskiej Rzeczypospolitej Ludowej w Hanoi**

**Streszczenie:** W artykule wskazano na trudności, jakie w 1969 r. napotykał Narodowy Front Wyzwolenia Wietnamu Południowego w następstwie fiaska komunistycznej Ofensywy Tet z 1968 r. Kwestie te przedstawiono na podstawie analizy notatek informacyjnych przesyłanych Zarządowi II Sztabu Generalnego Wojska Polskiego przez Attachat Wojskowy przy Ambasadzie Polskiej Rzeczypospolitej Ludowej w Hanoi. Tytułowa problematyka nie została jak dotąd wyczerpująco zanalizowana w istniejącej literaturze przedmiotu; cytowane dokumenty, mimo ich wartości, były – m.in. z uwagi na barierę językową – niedostępne dla historyków anglojęzycznych. W historiografii II wojny indochińskiej wciąż toczy się spór na temat tego, czy nieudana dla komunistów wojskowo, lecz wygrana propagandowo ofensywa Tet była wielką szansą dla Sajgonu i Waszyngtonu na odniesienie zwycięstwa, którą zmarnowano z przyczyn politycznych. Z analizowanych dokumentów wynika, że sytuacja Republiki Wietnamu w 1969 r. poprawiła się na tyle, iż Amerykanie mogli przystąpić do przekazywania większej odpowiedzialności za walkę z komunistami jej siłom zbrojnym, jednocześnie rozpoczynając proces wycofywania własnych wojsk. Niemniej jednak sytuacja społeczno-polityczna kształtująca się w Republice Wietnamu i w Stanach Zjednoczonych nie pozwoliła Sajgonowi na dostateczne ustabilizowanie Wietnamu Południowego, a Waszyngton zmuszała do zbyt pośpiesznego odwrotu z Indochin. Sukcesy osiągnięte w walce z komunistyczną partyzantką ostatecznie okazały się zatem nietrwałe i nie zmieniły końcowych rezultatów konfliktu.

**Słowa kluczowe:** II wojna indochińska, Ofensywa Tet, wietnamizacja, wywiad wojskowy

