

Ho Chi Minh

Ho Chi Minh

Ho Chi Minh (Ho the Most Enlightened) (1890–1969) became a world figure after the Second World War, during Vietnam's long struggle for independence from France. The first president of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), which declared its independence in September 1945, Ho attained his greatest renown in the 1960s, during the DRV's war against the United States for control of southern Vietnam. Yet by the end of 1963 he had become a largely symbolic leader, whose role in day-to-day decision making had ended. In a world of Communist strong men and tyrants, Ho was an exception: his moral authority did not give him any more power than his single vote in the politburo. The limitations on his power have only become clear in recent years, however, as fresh archival research has revealed the extent to which his leadership was contested within his own Communist Party.

Ho's political ideas were mainly shaped in the twenty years between 1907 and 1927, the period from his adolescent years in the Nguyen dynasty's capital of Hue to his flight from China following Chiang Kai-shek's coup against the Communists in the United Front. He was born as Nguyen Sinh Cung in 1892 or 1893, according to French sources, in the rugged north-central province of Nghe An. While his years as a sailor and laborer have been strongly emphasized in official biographies, Ho was in fact the son of a successful mandarin, who by 1901 had passed the second-highest examination in the realm to become a teacher of Chinese in Hue. Ho's father did not engage openly in anticolonial activity, but the first decade of the 20th century was a time of ferment in his milieu, which could not have failed to affect him and his family. The French had removed all real power from

the mandarin in 1898, and scholars such as Phan Chu Trinh, a contemporary of Ho's father, were refusing employment in the corrupt shell of the mandarin system. These scholars started a movement to encourage Western education and indigenous manufacturing. (Young Vietnamese men, Ho Chi Minh included, had until then studied the Chinese classics alone.) Another scholar from Ho's own district in Nghe An, Phan Boi Chau, started the Dong Du (Eastern Travel) movement in 1906, which encouraged promising young men to join him in Japan to receive a modern education and military training. In 1908 when an anti-tax campaign broke out in central Vietnam, the French blamed the modernizing scholars and arrested a number of them. French troops responded to a peaceful demonstration in Hue by shooting into the crowd. Ho Chi Minh, around fifteen at the time, witnessed this violence, and it would mark him for many years.

Ho's father became a district mandarin in 1909, but an accusation of violence against a prisoner in his jurisdiction, which he contested, led to his demotion. This change in his father's fortune forced Ho to withdraw from the prestigious National Studies School in Hue, where he was continuing his education in French and *quoc ngu*, the romanized Vietnamese script. His withdrawal marked the end of his formal education, unless one counts his studies in the Comintern's institutes in Moscow. In 1911 both he and his father made their way to Saigon, from where Ho sailed for France. In view of what we now know of Ho's family connections to Phan Chu Trinh and Phan Boi Chau, we can surmise that Ho was being sent abroad to receive a Western education that would prepare him to play a role in Vietnam's struggle for independence.

After working as a shipboard cook for over a year, and having failed to gain admission to a French academy that trained the sons of "high" mandarins, Ho turned up in London in 1913 or 1914, where he worked at odd jobs and studied English. He remained in London until the end of 1916, then returned to France to consult his colleagues on the future path of the independence movement. From then until the middle of 1919, when he appeared in Paris for the Peace Conference at the close of the First World War, his movements are uncertain. But there are indications in the French and Russian archives that in 1917–18 he lived in the United States, where he heard Marcus Garvey speak in Harlem and consulted Korean independence activists. When he turned up in Paris, he began circulating a petition with the "Demands of the

Vietnamese People” for greater freedom. It was signed, “Nguyen Ai Quoc” (Nguyen the Patriot), for the Group of Vietnamese Patriots. Although Ho received help in writing this appeal from his colleague Phan Van Truong, a professional interpreter and lawyer, the idea of addressing the Peace Conference was probably his own.

Ho would be known as Nguyen Ai Quoc for the next twenty years, even though he frequently used other pseudonyms. The campaign to win concessions from the Paris Conference failed, but Ho stayed on in France to canvass support from the Socialist Party and other sympathetic organizations. When his first contacts with the radicals of the Socialist Party began is uncertain, but by 1920, when a group that affiliated itself with the Third International split from the rest of the party, he joined them and thus became a founding member of the French Communist Party. By this time he had discovered Lenin’s views on imperialism, and eagerly embraced the theories of the Comintern on support to anticolonial movements. He devoted himself to political organizing from this time onward, even though he was suffering from poor health and had to earn his living. He joined the “Union Intercolonial,” composed of Africans, Caribbeans, Malagasies, and a number of his Vietnamese colleagues. This union, whose newspaper *Le Paria* Ho edited, became his primary political base until he departed in secret for Moscow in June 1923. His political life in Paris had become too circumscribed by police surveillance.

Ho’s arrival in Moscow is often described as the result of Dimitri Manuilski’s recruitment efforts, but this explanation probably attributes too much clarity and purpose to the Comintern’s dealings with Ho. (Although he would be attached to the Comintern until 1941, his status and official roles were often vaguely defined.) His trip to Moscow was organized by the Intercolonial Union, and it is uncertain that the Comintern had long-term plans to employ him when he arrived in 1923. He attended the first congress of the Peasant International (Krestintern) that October, and joined their presidium. After a number of months in Moscow he wrote a letter complaining that he had only expected to remain for three months, before moving on. He was eager to return to Southeast Asia to establish relations between the International and Indochina. But his return would not take place until November 1924, following his participation in the Fifth Comintern Congress, where he lobbied actively for more Comintern attention to the plight of colonized peoples. When the Comintern bureaucracy finally granted his

wish to travel to Canton, he was sent as a translator in the Russian news agency’s bureau, without any official cover.

Ho’s time in Canton was a productive and formative stage in his career. He used part of his translator’s salary to fund the training of Vietnamese émigrés in Guangzhou in Leninist concepts of revolution. He and his nucleus of like-minded Vietnamese took part in the propagandizing and peasant organizing connected with the United Front. By 1926 they were able to bring a group of young Vietnamese to China for a three-month training course, followed by a second, which produced the first cell of Vietnamese Communists. They did not have their own party until 1930, so were organized into a front group known as the Thanh Nien or Youth Association. The inner core became members of the CCP. Ho was believed to have discouraged a military uprising in Vietnam in 1926, which would have coincided with the start of the Northern Campaign in China, as his network of political trainees was still too small. When in April 1927 Chiang Kai-shek’s anti-Communist coup reached Canton, Ho had to depart rapidly.

He returned via Vladivostok to Moscow, then traveled to Paris, Brussels, and on to Berlin, to wait for a new assignment and funding for his return to Asia. This eventually came, but with money only to enough finance his return travel, and he was given no clear instructions beyond the suggestion that he should use his experience in China to start forming peasant unions. Ho was not invited to attend the Sixth Comintern Congress in Moscow, so made his way back to Asia, this time Siam, in the summer of 1928. He lived among the Vietnamese in northeastern Siam until mid-1929, when he was summoned to Hong Kong by the Thanh Nien leadership, to sort out the quarrels of rival Communist groups in Vietnam. He called a quick conference in Hong Kong in February 1930 for representatives of the two factions, and was able to patch together a draft party program that was in theory acceptable to both sides. Thus February 1930 became the founding date of the Vietnamese Communist Party.

This event, which has always been presented in official histories as a triumph for Ho Chi Minh, was the beginning of a stormy year for the VCP and in fact marked the start of Ho’s first political eclipse. He was sent by the Far Eastern Bureau to Singapore to form a national CP for Malaya, then remained in Hong Kong to carry on liaison work. The members of the new party within Vietnam apparently came under the influence of the

Ho Chi Minh

“revolutionary upsurge” then gaining ground in China, in the newly militant spirit of the Sixth Comintern Congress. Ho had no apparent directing role in the brief soviet movement, which broke out in his native region of central Vietnam in the autumn of 1930, and in fact his leadership was criticized in a party plenum that October. A new set of political theses in line with the Comintern’s new course replaced his short program, and party leadership was handed over to a Moscow trainee named Tran Phu. Ho attempted to give advice to his comrades, under siege in the spring of 1931, but was dismissed by Tran Phu as a product of the United Front in China, whose petty bourgeois influence had been harmful to the party. The entire Central Committee and most of the provincial leaders were arrested in the spring of 1931. The British police picked up Ho Chi Minh in June.

Ho narrowly escaped deportation to Vietnam from Hong Kong, and after a long appeal process was expelled from the British colony. He hid somewhere in China until he reestablished contact with the Comintern and got passage back to Russia. There is sufficient documentation in the Comintern archives to show that Ho was in eclipse during this stay in Moscow. His arrival in mid-1934 did not merit a hero’s welcome; instead he was sent to study at the Lenin School for cadres, along with Li Lisan. As preparations were underway for the Seventh Comintern Congress, two letters arrived from his party denouncing Ho’s leadership as petty bourgeois and accusing him of serious lapses in security. These may have been the reason that his mandate for the Seventh Congress was revoked. He remained in Moscow afterward, and later wrote that he had been removed from any role in his party in those years. He studied at the Institute for National and Colonial Problems until the autumn of 1938, when he was finally given the green light to return to southern China to help build a united anti-Fascist front.

The undermining of Ho’s authority from 1931 until 1938 set a pattern for his later career. His position was strongest when united fronts were the order of the day, as in 1924–27. On his return to China he had considerable difficulty in rebuilding contact with his party. Only in May 1941 was he able to hold a meeting, the Eighth Plenum, with members of the CC from inside Vietnam. It was then that Ho convinced them to form the Viet Minh alliance with other non-Communist parties and to concentrate on national liberation before a Socialist revolution. His other great coup was to convince the OSS to train and provide small arms to his group in the Viet Bac

in mid-1945. This alliance allowed the Viet Minh to enter Hanoi in late August 1945 as liberators sponsored by the United States, following the Japanese surrender.

Ho’s Declaration of Independence on September 2, 1945, did not win his new government recognition. The disorganization and lack of cohesion of the Viet Minh front in South Vietnam, where rival Communist groups existed, made it relatively easy for the French to regain control in Saigon. Ho exhibited his skills in diplomacy and political maneuvers, but failed to secure his new state. He broadened his government, giving posts to his Nationalist rivals, and ordered the Communist party to go underground, to reassure the international community. But the French continued to press for a return to Hanoi. Ho signed a *modus vivendi* with France in March 1946, which arranged for the occupying Nationalist Chinese troops to be replaced by the French. He was willing to accept a place in the French Overseas Union, so long as Vietnam controlled its own government, army, and finances. But negotiations dragged on, with the French insisting that South Vietnam was an independent state. Ho returned from an extended trip to France for the Fontainebleau negotiations empty-handed. In December the French attack on the Haiphong customs post led to all-out war, and the Viet Minh retreated from Hanoi to the maquis.

Vietnamese appeals to the United States to intervene failed; by mid-1947, as the Cold War hardened attitudes in Europe, Communist movements in Southeast Asia returned to armed struggle. Ho once again came under attack within his party for negotiating with France and “disbanding” the CP. In 1950, after the Communist Chinese victory, he followed Mao Zedong to Moscow for talks, and Mao convinced Stalin to accept Ho’s leadership of the DRV. But during Ho’s absence, a rival leader, Truong Chinh, asserted his control over the party, and when Ho returned to the maquis, he was increasingly given the role of “soul” of the Vietnamese revolution, while Truong Chinh became its “commander.” With Stalin’s consent, Chinese advisers began to play a major role in the Vietnamese party’s practice and ideology. The first phases of land reform got underway, and in 1952 a Party Rectification Campaign began to replace village leaders who belonged to the land-owning classes. By 1954 when the Geneva Conference brought peace to Vietnam, now divided at the 17th parallel, the political climate was quite different from that of 1945. The land reform campaign had intensified, growing more violent and often classifying middle peasants as landlords. It was probably

Khrushchev's speech to the Twentieth Congress in Moscow that made possible criticism of the land reform from within the party and led, in October 1956, to a public apology for the campaign's excesses.

Ho Chi Minh did not take the lead in the relaxation of ideological and cultural policies that occurred briefly in 1956. But he presided over them as acting general secretary after Truong Chinh was removed and the cadres associated with the excesses of land reform were demoted. He supported Khrushchev's policy of peaceful coexistence at the Communist summit of 1957, and again in 1961. However, by this time it had become clear that the Diem regime in South Vietnam would not hold elections as stipulated in the Geneva Agreements, and at the Third Party Congress in 1960 the party had already decided to reunify the country by force if necessary. A new first secretary, Le Duan, who was determined to aid the southern revolution, had been confirmed. In 1963 the Vietnamese became increasingly impatient with Khrushchev's policies and began to support Chinese attacks on his revisionism. At the end of 1963 at the Ninth Party Plenum, a resolution was passed to make Vietnam's foreign and internal policies follow those of China. Several memoirs maintain that Ho's opinions were ignored at this meeting. At a Christmas meeting with the Soviet ambassador that year, Ho announced that he would be retiring from the day-to-day running of the country. The Ninth Plenum seems to have been a personal defeat for him, although he did not disagree with the policy of making reunification a priority. He probably did disapprove the unequivocal condemnation of Soviet revisionism, however.

After 1964 the frail Ho increasingly became a symbol of the David-and-Goliath struggle between the tiny DRV and the United States. He received southern fighters and was photographed at anti-aircraft batteries. He met foreign visitors and issued inspiring messages to his people. He undertook foreign missions to win support for the DRV. But his influence on political decisions by this stage is unclear. It was sometimes hinted that he was growing senile, but American peace envoys who met him in 1967 described him as still sharp enough to converse in English and as requesting that they send their correspondence to him directly. His trips to China for medical treatment and rest grew more frequent, however, and he in fact spent most of 1967 there. He survived long enough to witness the beginning of peace negotiations in Paris in 1968, but also observed the hardships his people were enduring because of the war. In his "Last Will and

Testament," part of which was suppressed, he requested tax relief for farmers and expressed a wish that the split in the Socialist camp be mended.

A Soviet embalming team was already in Vietnam when Ho died in September 1969. With considerable difficulty his body was preserved until it could be placed in its tomb on Ba Dinh Square in 1976. Thus Ho Chi Minh, against his will, became the cult figure of the Communist dynasty begun in 1945. Ironically, although he often was at odds with the policies of his party, he became the source of its legitimacy as the force of Communist ideology waned. His every writing and speech is combed for sources of Ho Chi Minh Thought, the closest thing that Vietnam now possesses to a guiding ideology. Some writers describe him as a prisoner of the system he created. He was in many respects a prisoner, but it is difficult to say that he created the system. It may be more accurate to say that he was a captive of his need for Communist support to win independence. This seriously restricted Ho's political options throughout his career.

See also Anti-imperialism; Cold War; Comintern; Decolonization; Nationalism; Vietnam War.

FURTHER READING

- Brocheux, P. *Ho Chi Minh: du révolutionnaire à l'icône*. Paris: Editions Payot and Rivages, 2003.
- Duiker, W. *Ho Chi Minh: A Life*. New York: Hyperion, 2000.
- Goscha, C. E., and B. de Trégodé. *Naissance d'un Etat-Parti: Le Vietnam depuis 1945*. Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2004.
- Lacouture, J. *Ho Chi Minh: A Political Biography*. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1967.
- Quinn-Judge, S. *Ho Chi Minh: The Missing Years*. London: Christopher Hurst, 2003.

SOPHIE QUINN-JUDGE