

Ho Chi Minh: The Impact of His Leadership: 1910-1945

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“Ho Chi Minh: The Impact of His Leadership: 1910-1945” examines the impact Ho Chi Minh had on the creation and the rise of the Vietnamese communist movement. It explores all of the different ways Minh influenced the party and challenges the notion that the individuals place in history has become obsolete. This essay argues that Minh’s unique circumstances (specifically his background within the western world and within the USSR) and abilities (specifically his ability to unite various groups and causes within Vietnam under the common banner of nationalism) made him invaluable to the establishment of the communist party in Vietnam, and that the nation would have developed very differently without his presence.

Ho Chi Minh City, the largest city in Vietnam, has a population of 7.3 million people.¹ While the massive city was originally called Saigon, the name was changed to Ho Chi Minh in 1975 to signify the complete reunification of Vietnam following the rise of the Northern regime. Intrigue is immediately spawned by the regime’s choice of naming, as the Northern Vietnamese government was led by Le Duan, a man known for his several disagreements with the aforementioned Ho Chi Minh. In spite of the two leaders’ divergence of opinions, Le Duan allowed the capital to be named after Ho Chi Minh in order to recognize the pivotal role he played in the formation of their new nation. The significance placed on a single man’s influence in the course of world events has gone through a dramatic shift in recent years. In the past, individuals were credited with having a tremendous amount of influence when historical events were evaluated. Yet there has been a recent trend towards the minimization of the importance of individuals on history, generated by a fear that most of the importance placed on individuals is done out of a desire to create legendary heroes and villains and ignore myriad social, economic, and political factors. To accredit all historical changes to individuals is a neat and tidy way of examining history; in reality, however, credit for world events belongs to a combination of factors. Nevertheless, it is incorrect to deny the importance of Ho Chi Minh in the foundation of the modern Vietnamese state. His impact was inestimable; at times, his competence was the only thing holding the fragile resistance movement together. The actions of Ho Chi Minh in his earliest days as an active agent of change, from his time in France until the end of the Second World War, demonstrate how crucial he was to the eventual creation of the modern Vietnamese state.

Minh was the driving factor behind the creation of a unified Vietnam as a result of his ability to communicate, his ability to play the political game, and his unrelenting determination to see the creation of an independent Vietnamese state. His abilities and resolve enabled him to gain many powerful allies in the Communist parties of France and Russia early in his life, and they also enabled him to hold the resistance movement in Vietnam together through several hardships. As

¹ "Major Urban Areas – Population," The World Factbook.
<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2219.html>.

such, specific instances in Ho's life where his unique abilities made a difference in the history of Vietnam are necessary to reveal in order to comprehend his significance.

Ho Chi Minh was born in 1890 in the Kim Lien village, which is located in the northern part of the country.² He received a French education, and in the year 1911 he secured a job on a steamer in order to travel to France.³ In the years between 1911 and 1917, he traveled around the world, making stops in America as well as in England. It was during this time that many of his revolutionary beliefs began to take hold. He witnessed oppression in all of the major countries he visited, and he frequently wrote of his experiences witnessing acts of oppression. One fascinating example of this was an essay he wrote on the lynching of blacks in America, entitled *Lynching*.⁴ In it, he describes the process of a lynching in detail, and laments its existence. He also ties the animosity of some Caucasians towards blacks to an economic reason, writing, "these crimes were all motivated by economic jealousy. Either the Negroes in the area were more prosperous than the whites, or the black workers would not let themselves be exploited thoroughly."⁵

These early travels were of vital importance to Ho Chi Minh's ideological and political development. They would collectively become one of the chief factors in his tremendous effectiveness at organizing and leading the resistance to the French—in part because they convinced Ho Chi Minh to join the socialist, anti-imperialist movement, but also because his joining would give him a number of skills that would be crucial to the efficacy of his leadership. He interacted with the Western world and learned how to act in a manner similar to theirs. His ability to communicate with people from the West would prove to be invaluable, and this ability was a large part of what made him important to the Vietnamese's resistance movement.

In 1917, Minh traveled to France, where he met several Indochinese nationals who supported Vietnamese independence. Minh famously joined with these nationalists to bring a petition at the famous Versailles conferences entitled *Demands of the Annamite People*. The petition asked for freedom for the Vietnamese people, but it was overlooked by the nations in power.⁶ By this time, Ho Chi Minh was fully devoted to the anti-colonialist movement, and he would soon look to the socialist party in France for support, as a large portion of Communist thought was devoted to anti-colonialism (especially compared to the other political parties in France).

An example of the support the socialist party gave to Ho Chi Minh can be seen in the transcript of a speech Minh gave to the French Socialist Party in 1920 at the Tours Congress. In the speech, Minh petitioned the party to aid Indochinese Independence by saying, "on behalf of the whole of Mankind, on behalf of the Socialist Party's members, both left and right wings, we

² Pierre Brocheux, *Ho Chi Minh* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 9.

³ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴ Ho Chi Minh, *Lynching*, in *Ho Chi Minh on Revolution*, Ed. Bernard D. Fall (London: Fredrick A. Praeger Publishers), 54.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁶ Brocheux, *Minh*, 13.

call upon you! Comrades, save us!”⁷ Minh’s plea, it turns out, was answered, at least in spirit, by the French Socialist party. At the conclusion of Minh’s speech, the party’s chairman stated that, “through the applause of approval, the Indochinese Delegate can realize that the whole of the Socialist Party sides with you [Minh] to oppose the crimes committed by the bourgeois class.”⁸

In this speech, we can begin to see some of the impact Minh would later have on Vietnam. Minh was rallying a group of people around a common cause, bringing the left and right wings of a party together behind the struggle for freedom from colonization. These skills would later be put to use in bringing together many different kinds of people across Vietnam under the Viet-Minh banner, enabling the resistance to go toe to toe with France after World War II. In addition, Minh was helping to end the first Indo-Chinese war before it even started by sowing the seeds of support for Vietnamese independence in France. As the first Indochinese War stretched on, popular support for the war would decline in France, in part because a growing subsection of the population believed that Vietnam should not be under the control of a foreign power.

In 1923, Minh moved to Moscow.⁹ He began working with the Communist party; specifically, he worked with the Comintern (which was a Soviet-lead organization created to spread Communism across the globe). While living in Moscow, he received more education on how to bring about revolution. Minh gave much ideological credit to Lenin, writing that, “Lenin’s strategy on this question is applied by various Communist parties in the world, and has won over the best and most positive elements in the colonies to take part in Communist movements.”¹⁰

Soon after his sojourn in Moscow, Minh moved to China.¹¹ China is where Minh began to incubate the seeds of the future Communist party of Vietnam. He created the first Indochinese Communist organization in 1925 in Canton China when he organized the Revolutionary Youth League of Vietnam.¹² The League was made up of Vietnamese nationals who traveled to China, and it effectively served as a school for Minh to teach these young Vietnamese men Communist and revolutionary theory. These men would either go back to Vietnam or travel to Russia for further training. Eventually, Minh ended up training around 300 men, and these fledgling Communist ideologues came to form the embryo of the Communist party in Vietnam.¹³

The Revolutionary Youth League was Minh’s brainchild, and, as such, it served as a terrific example of his importance to the formation of the modern Vietnamese state. One of the goals of the Youth League, as stated by the Comintern, was to unify the small French resistance movements across Vietnam.¹⁴ William Dukier, who is an East Asian Professor Emeritus of Liberal Arts at

⁷ Ho Chi Minh, *Speech at the Tours Congress*, in *Ho Chi Minh on Revolution*, Ed. Bernard D. Fall (London: Fredrick A. Praeger Publishers), 21.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁹ Brocheux, *Minh*, 23.

¹⁰ Ho Chi Minh, *Lenin and the East*, in *Ho Chi Minh on Revolution*, Ed. Bernard D. Fall (London: Fredrick A. Praeger Publishers), 61.

¹¹ Ruth Fisher, “Ho Chi Minh: Disciplined Communist,” *Foreign Affairs* 33, no. 1: 86-97. <http://www.ebsco.com/>

¹² Brocheux, *Minh*, 36.

¹³ William Dukier, “The Revolutionary Youth League: Cradle of Communism in Vietnam,” *The China Quarterly*, no 51 [Cambridge University Press, School of Oriental and African Studies]: 475-99. <http://www.jstor.org>

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Penn State University, writes that “according to Comintern strategy in the mid-1920s, it would be the task of the Revolutionary Youth League to attempt to bring all of these disparate elements together in a broad anti-imperialist united front.”¹⁵ The fact that the Comintern had a strategy at all for Vietnam was due in large part to Minh, and the fact that he led the organization as well only further emphasizes just how crucial he was to the foundation to of Vietnamese Communist party.

Chiang Kai-shek and his anti-Communist forces in China forced the Revolutionary Youth League to dissolve in 1927.¹⁶ However, within a few years, the former students moved back to Vietnam and begin to create micro-Communist parties.¹⁷ In 1930, Ho Chi Minh was tasked with unifying these disparate groups under one Communist banner. He was able to do so quickly, and relatively painlessly, despite the fact that the smaller groups all had slightly different ideas. The group was called the Indochinese Communist Party (hereafter known as the ICP), and was the first Communist party recognized by the Comintern in the Vietnamese region.¹⁸

Minh implemented a directive into the founding of the ICP that had a profound impact on the future of the organization. In a speech made immediately following the formation of the ICP, Minh made a list of “slogans” that the ICP would try to emulate, the first being “to overthrow French imperialism, feudalism, and the reactionary Vietnamese capitalist class,” with the second being, “to make Indochina completely independent.”¹⁹ The second “slogan” as Minh called it, was of vital importance, as it later allowed the ICP and its successor parties to envelope members of other resistance groups under its governance. The first was important because it had a profound impact on the Communist party’s refusal to allow the South to maintain independence from the North during the Second Indochinese war, as the Southern government was considered to be ruled by the aforementioned “Vietnamese capitalist class” created by the French. By 1930, Minh had not only established the forerunner of the party that would rule Vietnam in the present day; he had set up major policy directives for this organization.

Could Communism have spread to Vietnam whether or not Ho Chi Minh created the ICP? While there is no way definitively to answer this question, evidence gives a negative indication. Dukier states that “at the time of Nguyen Ai Quoc’s [Ho Chi Minh’s birth name] arrival in Canton, Marxist ideas had made little impression on the Vietnamese nationalist movement.”²⁰ According to Dukier, most of the resistance movements that were already in place at the time of Minh’s reintroduction to the political landscape of Vietnam were decidedly un-Marxist in their thought. Dukier, writing about the Vietnamese Nationalist Party (which was the primary resistance group in North Vietnam), states that the Vietnamese Nationalist Party “possessed no noticeable tendency towards Marxism and, according to some, attracted a more middle class clientele than either the

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Brouchex, *Minh*, 47.

¹⁷ Ibid., 48.

¹⁸ Ibid., 48.

¹⁹ Ho Chi Minh, *Appeal Made on the Occasion of the Founding of the Communist Party of Indochina*, in *Ho Chi Minh on Revolution*, Ed. Bernard D. Fall (London: Fredrick A. Praeger Publishers), 131.

²⁰ Dukier, *Vietminh*.

League or the Revolutionary Party.”²¹ These other resistance groups, however, were quickly eclipsed by the ICP in terms of power, and the advent of the Japanese invasion allowed the ranks of the ICP to swell (indirectly) through Minh’s creation of the Viet-Minh a decade later.

Perhaps one of Minh’s most amazing accomplishments was the fact that from 1911 until 1945 (with a few months spent in Vietnam during this time to oversee the formation of the Viet-Minh),²² he operated outside of Vietnam. Even more impressive was the fact that, from 1931 until his return to Vietnam in 1945, Minh was on the run (or in jail) because of the French government and several elements of the Communist party itself. He was arrested multiple times, and had to use his wiles to stay alive. Despite these incredible hardships, Minh was able to stay in power with the ICP at some level. This maintaining of power is an incredible testament to the Vietnamese people’s respect for Minh— respect given for his writings and complex ideology, his unique connections with the outside world and the Communist parties of China, Russia, and France, and his exceptional leadership abilities.

Despite his lasting effect on the party and on the Vietnamese people, Minh’s direct influence did decline dramatically after the foundation of the ICP. This decline was primarily because Minh “had furthermore advocated a tactic of reform and collaboration among the classes,” while other elements of the ICP were more focused on class struggle and warfare (as well as the fact that he often simply could not communicate with the party).²³ However, Minh’s more lenient stance towards the bourgeois eventually became incredibly useful for him. The eventual Japanese invasion of Vietnam demanded that the Communist party set aside many of its goals in order to protect the country from attack. As a result, Minh and the ICP created the Viet-Minh in order to bring many new fighters into the resistance movement.

By 1941, Minh had regained much of his influence in the ICP. There were three primary reasons for the restoration of Minh’s power: his connections with the Comintern, his policy’s focus on uniting the people against foreign invaders, and the death of many ICP members in the purges that landed Minh in jail. At any rate, in May 1941, Minh called the ICP’s eighth conference, where he would form the Viet-Minh.²⁴ The Viet-Minh was an armed resistance group that incorporated as many fighters as possible. In a letter Minh wrote prior to the formation of the Viet-Minh in 1941, he wrote, “rich people, soldiers, workers, peasants, intellectuals, employees, traders, youth, and women who warmly love your country! At the present time national liberation is the most important problem. Let us unite together!”²⁵

In addition to founding the Viet-Minh at the eighth ICP conference, Minh also oversaw the appointment of many new leaders who came to have a tremendous impact on the future of Vietnam, including Vo Nguyen Giap. Giap went on to be one of the most successful generals of

²¹ Ibid.

²² Brouchex, *Minh*, 69.

²³ Ibid., 64.

²⁴ *Ho Chi Minh Organizes the Viet Minh*, Great Events, (US: Salem Press, 1999) <http://www.ebscho.com>.

²⁵ Ho Chi Minh, *Letter from Abroad*, in *Ho Chi Minh on Revolution*, Ed. Bernard D. Fall (London: Fredrick A. Praeger Publishers), 134.

the twenty-first century, scoring a major victory against the French at Bien-Dien Phu in 1954, which helped to end both French occupation and the first Indochinese war later in 1954.

Ultimately, the Viet-Minh was unable to push out the Japanese. They were, however, able to secure around 200,000 “village defense” fighters, who— after the Japanese left Vietnam with the conclusion of WWII— took several cities in Vietnam.²⁶ This enabled Minh and the ICP to declare independence and to create the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. It is doubtful that this would have been possible without Ho Chi Minh’s leadership and vision.

Between 1911 and 1945, Ho Chi Minh created the Revolutionary Youth League, the Indochinese Communist Party, the Viet Minh, and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. He did so in the face of continuous adversity and almost entirely without entering the country of Vietnam. His desire to see a Vietnam free of foreign oppressors guided him the entire time along with his writing ability, communication skills, contacts, and sheer determination allowed him to be successful. Ho Chi Minh was the factor that led to the creation of the modern Vietnamese state. To deny the massive importance of Ho Chi Minh to the formation of the modern Vietnamese state is to fly in the face of logic, and to abandon reason entirely.

²⁶ *Ho Chi Minh Organizes the Viet Minh*, Great Events, (US: Salem Press, 1999) <http://www.ebscho.com>.