

There are few figures in the Vietnam War, and perhaps in all of history, that deserve sympathy as much as North Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh. Like many Vietnamese civilians that took part in the Vietnam War, Ho Chi Minh grew up under French imperial rule. During his childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, Ho witnessed the true damaging effects imperialism had on his country. Disillusioned with French imperialism and European socialism, Ho Chi Minh sought to develop a political philosophy that would serve Vietnam through its independence. Through his childhood, and experiences abroad, Ho Chi Minh developed a political ideology that was truly unique to anti-colonialism, and Vietnam.

Ho Chi Minh was born in the Nghe An province of Vietnam, an area known for nurturing many Vietnamese nationalists, sometime between 1890 and 1894. By the time of his birth, the French had already conquered all of Indochina. They had begun a complete re-organization of the educational system, doing away with all Chinese and Confucian influences that had defined Vietnamese education since China's occupation of the country centuries ago. Despite this, Ho Chi Minh himself received a more traditional education from his father, who introduced Ho to Confucian and Buddhist ideas.¹ It was here that he learned of Vietnamese history, and began to develop a strong sense of ethnocentric identity.² He also attended a Franco-Annamite school that exposed him to the ideas of the French Revolution and more republican ideologies. He proved to be a brilliant student, both curious and eloquent. For secondary school, he attended the prestigious National Academy, and allegedly participated in the Revolt of the Short Hairs

¹ Pierre Brocheux, *Ho Chi Minh: A Biography*. Translated by Claire Duiker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 1, 2.

² Bernard B Fall, "Ho Chi Minh: A Profile," introduction to *On Revolution: Selected Writings, 1920-1966* ed. Bernard B. Fall (Great Britain: The Pall Mall Press, 1967) ix.

against the French, a peasant revolt that took place during this time.³ Through his education, Ho began to formulate many of his revolutionary and political ideals. A long history of Vietnamese opposition to foreign invasion, and his mixed schooling would later contribute to a revolutionary philosophy that was an amalgamation of American, French, Soviet, and Chinese ideologies.⁴

At a young age, Ho had already begun to develop a strong sense of nationalism. Much of this was in response to the experiences of his father, Nguyen Sinh Sac. Sac's life exemplified a classic colonial success story; an orphan at a young age, Sac was adopted and became the son-in-law of a scholar of the village he lived in. He then taught the children of the village until he passed his civil service exam, becoming a "doctorate, second class" under the French regime. In 1906, he took a job as a subaltern to the Minister of Rites and was later promoted to Vice Magistrate of the Binh Khe district, a considerably high position under the French colonial government. Possibly as a result of his humble origins, Sac used his position to support the Vietnamese peasantry. He advocated for the poor, supported demonstrators who rallied against the tax system, and freed prisoners. In 1910, however, he let his temper and his nationalistic pride overwhelm him, and was responsible for the beating and subsequent death of a French, landlord who had been allegedly cruel to Vietnamese peasants. The French administration sentenced Sac to one hundred lashes with a switch, a demotion, and time in prison.⁵ Afterwards, he did not rejoin the administration. Sac was only one of many Vietnamese victims of French bureaucracy; the imperialist system benefited him when he obeyed it, but punished him harshly when he stepped outside of their boundaries. Ho Chi Minh saw the cruel punishment his father faced for advocating on the behalf of the Vietnamese peasantry, and subsequently became disillusioned with the French. Ho realized that the Vietnamese could

³ Brocheux 3, 6.

⁴ George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950 - 1975* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002) 4.

⁵ Brocheux 6, 2, 3, 4 5.

never achieve true equality under colonial rule, as the French would never see them as equal, no matter how high they climbed on the political or social hierarchy. It was purely a matter of race and European supremacy. This first brush with the true consequences of imperialism further spurred Ho's Vietnamese nationalism, placing anti-colonialism at the ideological center of his revolutionary philosophy.

Throughout the 1910s and 1920s, Ho expanded his worldview, and his political ideals, through years of travel. In 1911, he embarked on a boat to France, paying his way by working as a ship's assistant. Contrary to the teachings of his colonial educators, Ho saw a country destitute with war, poverty, and prostitution. In the midst of one of the greatest wars in human history, the entire continent of Europe was in a violent disarray. He quickly recognized the irony of the French and European attempts to "civilize" third world countries like Vietnam. "Why don't the French civilize their own people instead of trying to civilize us?" he remarked. After joining the French Socialist Party, Ho also wandered to England, Tunis, East Africa, the U.S. and the Congo, where he saw the oppression of colonial rule and other inequities, like Civil Rights. In 1919, Ho presented his *Demands of the Annamite People* at the Versailles conference, asking for autonomy, equal rights, and political freedom for the Vietnamese.⁶ He was promptly turned away, but this attempt demonstrated a determination that would serve him for the remainder of his life. He spoke fervently about the importance of decolonization, couching it in the narrative of socialism.⁷ Ho also joined the French Socialist Party, but found the Eurocentric political ideology lacking in plans for the decolonization of the Indochina, and other areas suffering under imperialist rule.⁸ The French socialists proposed a "humanitarian colonialism," where "uncivilized" peoples could be enlightened in a safer, more productive manner. Having seen the

⁶ Brocheux 9, 10.

⁷ Ho Chi Minh, "Some Considerations On the Colonial Question," *On Revolution: Selected Writings, 1920-1966* ed. Bernard B. Fall (Great Britain: The Pall Mall Press, 1967) 9.

⁸ Brocheux 20.

effects of colonialism in any form, Ho disagreed fervently with this, and quickly realized that decolonization was not a priority for European socialism. Again disillusioned, he founded the French Communist Party in 1920, but faced further political criticism. By this time, Ho had clearly developed a hatred for the French.⁹ While Ho did adopt some of the basic ideals behind socialism, like economic and social equality, this experience in France pushed Ho further from European leftist ideas, and closer to a more uniquely Vietnamese and anti-colonial philosophy.

Ho Chi Minh made his way to Russia in 1923 after Dmitri Manuilsky summoned him. In Russia, Communists had been in power since the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, and were beginning to further develop their ideology under Lenin, and shortly, Stalin. Learning of the Russia Revolution, Ho Chi Minh had begun to consider revolution itself as a faster alternative to the comparatively slow political process of the European powers. While in Moscow, Ho attended multiple Comintern meetings, and soon realized that like Western Europe, Russia too underestimated the importance of ending colonialism. Ho disagreed with Stalin's assertion that Communism would have to find success in imperialist countries before it could spread to the third world. Instead, Ho thought that revolution should liberate colonized countries. He did, however, appreciate the basic ideology behind Communism, but simultaneously recognized that Russia and France both presented a very Eurocentric brand of Communism that did not prioritize liberating a country like Vietnam. "Europe is not all of humanity," Ho concluded, indicating that his experiences in Russia and France and given him a basic ideology on which to formulate his ideas, but also helped him to recognize that European Communism would never provide the revolutionary philosophy to free Vietnam.¹⁰

In late 1924, Ho traveled by train into China, serving as a press correspondent and delegate for the French Communist Party. There, he spent time in Canton, and participated in

⁹ Ho Chi Minh, "In France, December 26, 1920," Collection of Letters by Ho Chi Minh, accessed April 29, 2016, <http://www.rationalrevolution.net/war/>.

¹⁰ Brocheux 13, 14, 18, 11, 17, 25, 27.

Chinese Communist Party activities, giving lectures and attending congresses. In June of 1925, Ho founded the Revolutionary Youth League of Vietnam, and through this he solidified much of his ideology. He wanted to separate himself from the Vietnamese nationalists who wanted to end foreign involvement in their country, but did not know what system to put in place after independence. During this time, he wrote about reformism, anarchism, Gandhism, Confucianism, and recognized the strengths and limitations of each. It was here that Ho began to form an ideology that was a blend of European Communism, and more traditional Confucian philosophies. Ho also solidified his own revolutionary strategy. Having seen the failures and success of the Chinese Communists, he realized that a united front between nationalists and separate Communist power, like the Comintern, would fail.¹¹ Not only would Vietnam require an independent, autonomous Communist party, but it would also have to mobilize the peasantry for any proletariate revolution to take place. These ideas combined of Ho's experiences abroad, and drew upon the nationalism that he learned as a child.

While still in China, Ho Chi Minh united the two current Vietnamese Communist parties to establish the Indochinese Communist Party in October of 1930. The party had ten main tenets:

1. To overthrow French imperialism and Vietnamese feudalism and reactionary bourgeoisie.
2. To make Indochina completely independent.
3. To establish a worker-peasant-soldier government.
4. To confiscate the banks and other enterprises belonging to the imperialists and put them under the control of the worker-peasant-soldier government.
5. To confiscate all the plantations and property belonging to the imperialists and the Vietnamese reactionary bourgeoisie and distribute them to the poor peasants.
6. To implement the 8-hour working day.

¹¹ Brocheux 29, 34, 36, 37, 38, 41.

7. To abolish the forced buying of government bonds, the poll-tax and all unjust taxes hitting the poor.
8. To bring democratic freedoms to the masses.
9. To dispense education to all the people.
10. To realize equality between man and woman.¹²

These tenets exemplified Ho's application of Communist ideology to the country of Vietnam. They focused specifically on freeing Vietnam from imperialist powers, not just inciting revolution to convert the country to Communism. Ho seemed to have utilized Communism as a platform on which to base his anti-imperialist ideologies, and saw it as the most fitting ideology to seize power from the imperialist French, redistribute it to the Vietnamese people, and ultimately establish economic and social equality in Vietnam. When the Americans replaced the French in South Vietnam after the First Indochinese War, Ho's ideology changed little, and the struggle for a unified, free Vietnam continued.¹³

Ho Chi Minh had developed a philosophy that was a blend of Communism, Confucian ideology, with lesser influences from the French and American Revolutions. He neither fully approved of nor fully rejected any of these individual doctrines, but rather wanted to combine each of them into a revised set of principles that would work for the Vietnamese people. Ho claimed that he wanted to "revise Marxism, down to its historical foundations, by strengthening it with Oriental ethnology." Ho's Communism seemed to view Marxism and Leninism through an Confucian lens; "let us perfect ourselves intellectually through the readings of Confucius, and revolutionarily through the works of Lenin." Additionally, Ho also drew on French and American revolutionary ideologies. Ho had learned the core ideologies of liberty, equality, and brotherhood during his Franco-Annamite schooling, and kept these in mind throughout the formation of his

¹² Ho Chi Minh, "Ho Calls for Revolution" in *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War* ed. Robert J. McMahon (Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 2008) 21-22.

¹³ Ang Cheng Guan, "The Vietnam War, 1962-64: The Vietnamese Communist Perspective," *Journal of Contemporary History* 35:4 (2005): 605.

political ideology.¹⁴ In *Road to Revolution*, the 1927 training manual for the Vietnamese Revolutionary Youth League, he admired America for its ability to overcome colonialism, and noted America and Vietnam's shared experiences of colonial rule.¹⁵ Perhaps most telling of all, the opening lines of the 1945 Vietnamese Declaration of Independence were nearly identical to the document's American counterpart. Ho's ultimate ideology was not Marxism, nor Leninism, nor pure Communism, but his own individual conglomerate of schools of thought, molded to free and serve the Vietnamese people.¹⁶

Above all, Ho Chi Minh was a nationalist who sought out a political ideology that would bring independence and equality to his country. Ho believed that even the upper echelons of Vietnamese society (those in the colonial government, and Mandarins) had suffered under imperial rule as well as the peasantry, representing a clear break from pure Communist ideology. Ho drew on nearly every experience, from his childhood to his experiences in Europe and beyond, to develop a nationalist-Communist revolutionary philosophy. "Nationalism is our country's greatest resource," he said, indicating that ultimately, Ho would do what was necessary to ensure a future of freedom and national pride for Vietnam.

¹⁴ Brocheux 20, 27, 38.

¹⁵ Mark Philip Bradley, "America's Symbolic Importance for Vietnamese Nationalists." In *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War*. Ed. Robert J. McMahon. (Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 2008) 43.

¹⁶ Alexander Woodside, "History, Structure, and Revolution in Vietnam," *International Political Science Review* 10:2 (1989): 145.

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