

# Ho chi minh- north vietnam leader assignment

[History](#)



Ho Chi Minh: North Vietnam Leader Published Online: July 25, 2006 Although the most visible symbol of America's chief enemy in the Vietnam War, Ho Chi Minh was still a difficult figure to hate. A frail and benign-looking old man in peasant garb or Mao jacket, the leader of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam seemed perfectly described as ' Uncle Ho,' an epithet bestowed upon him by friend and enemy alike. Indeed, he often seemed more symbol than substance??? a mere face on a poster, an intangible foe unreachable by modern means of warfare, an almost mythical personification of the Communist enemy.

But Ho Chi Minh was the very real driving force without which the unified Vietnamese state would never have been achieved. For more than 50 years, most of which he spent away from Southeast Asia, Ho worked single-mindedly to realize the end of French colonialism and the erection of a Vietnamese national state. That determination, rather than genius, was his hallmark as a leader. If the Vietnamese revolution produced a real genius, then it was certainly Vo Nguyen Giap, a military leader who would have stood out in any army.

Ho Chi Minh, however, was the essential man whose drive and determination focused the efforts of others and whose leadership excited the admiration and support of Vietnamese on both sides of the 17th parallel. Details of Ho Chi Minh's life are vague, curiously so for such a prominent national leader. Every biography differs in some fundamental detail, offering the reader no certainty about the man. Ho Chi Minh himself is responsible for much of this, for he consciously distanced himself from his own past and his own origins,

choosing to identify with the revolutionary ideal rather than the old mandarin traditions.

In his personal break with family and tradition, Ho set the example for the new nation he wished to create, a Vietnamese state unencumbered by the weight of a heritage that accepted foreign rule. Because he gave no particular importance to details of his life, Ho Chi Minh's date of birth and true name are in question. Most of what we know about the man can only be considered informed supposition. He was probably born Nguyen Van Thanh, the youngest son of three children of Nguyen Tat Sac, in Kim Lien Village of Nghe An Province in Central Vietnam, on May 19, 1890.

He attended the French lycee in Vinh between 1895 and 1905 when (depending upon the source) he was dismissed either for reasons of politics or poor grades. Between 1906 and 1910, he was a student in the noted Lycee Quoc Hoc in Hue, a school distinguished for its nationalist sentiments and one that produced other prominent figures in modern Vietnamese history ??? among them Ngo Dinh Diem, Vo Nguyen Giap and Pham Van Dong. In 1910, again for reasons uncertain, he left the school without a degree and briefly taught in Phan-Thiet, a little town where, coincidentally, Ngo Dinh Diem also lived as provincial administrator some 20 years later.

In 1911, Ho completed courses in a school for bakers in Saigon, and in 1912 took the name of Ba and accepted a job as a messboy on a French liner on the Saigon-Marseilles run. Bernard Fall, one of the earliest and most acute students of the Vietnamese revolution, regards this as the single critical decision of his life. When he turned to the West, Ho Chi Minh rejected the

traditional conservative Vietnamese nationalist course of militarism and a mandarin society, and instead chose the course of republicanism, democracy and popular sovereignty.

Meeting other Vietnamese nationalists in Paris, Ho found he could not accept their course of peaceful cooperation with the French, and sought another solution. After living in France for a time, Ho is said to have moved to London, where he was a cook's helper under Escoffier at the Carlton Hotel. During World War I, some sources insist, he moved to the United States, where he lived in Harlem. If true, this experience gave him background material for his Pamphlet *La Race Noire* (1924), a tract bitterly critical of American capitalism and treatment of blacks.

Sometime in 1917 or 1918, living now under the name of Nguyen Ai-Quoc (Nguyen the Patriot), he returned to France and earned his living retouching photographs in the XVIIth District of Paris. The great Peace Conference at Versailles in 1919 was the occasion for Ho's formal entry into politics. Excited by the prospect of a peace based on President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points ??? especially the point concerning national self-determination of peoples ??? Ho drafted a modest eight-point program for Vietnam and, renting a formal suit, sought an audience with leaders of the great powers.

His proposals would not have meant independence for Vietnam, but instead called for greater equity, more basic freedoms, and Vietnamese representation in the colonial government. Unable to gain a hearing at Versailles, Ho then pursued the colonial question in the French Socialist

Party, of which he was a member. At the Party Congress at Tours on Christmas Day, 1920, Ho Chi Minh sided with the Communist wing of the party since the Communists advocated immediate independence for all colonial areas.

He thus was a founding member of the French Communist Party and became the party's leading expert on colonial matters. In 1920 and '21 he traveled throughout France, speaking to groups of Annamese soldiers and workers who were awaiting their return to Vietnam, doubtless earning some early converts to the nationalist cause, if not to the Communist one. The next half-dozen years were spent as the true Communist internationalist. Ho attended all of the early Comintern conferences, and became acquainted with the great figures of the Russian Communist Party, meeting Lenin probably in 1922.

He lived in Moscow for several years; in 1924 as a student at the Eastern Workers' University. In 1925, Ho went to China with Michael Borodin and helped organize the Vietnam Revolutionary Youth League, a training school for Indochinese students in Canton. That year saw the publication of his most important work, *Le Proces de la Colonisation Francaise*, a naive pamphlet that indicted the French colonial system. Despite its limitations, the tract became the handbook for Vietnamese nationalists and was widely distributed in Indochina.

From 1925 to 1927, when Chiang Kai-shek broke with the Communists and Borodin's group fled to Russia, Ho formed more than 200 carefully trained cadres of expatriate Vietnamese, whom he sent back to Indochina. Ho's

ruthlessness showed up in the formation of those cadres. If, at the completion of training, any of the men had second thoughts or displayed an unwillingness to obey Communist instructions, Ho simply leaked their names to the French officials in Indochina. The French promptly arrested the defecting cadres and probably paid their informant a reward.

Ho was then killing two birds with one stone; he rid himself of undependable nationalists and gained funds for his movement. Over the next few years, his wanderings are not well-documented. It is likely he returned to Europe as an agent of the Third International, some sources claiming that he lived in Berlin for a time. By 1929, he was living in Thailand, working within a large community of Vietnamese emigres. He traveled to Hong Kong in 1930, where he pulled the various Indochinese Communist movements together into one party. Briefly under arrest in Hong Kong, he surfaced in Moscow in 1934 as a student in the Lenin School.

By 1938, he had returned to China and was serving as a radio operator with the Chinese Communist Eighth Route Army, eventually becoming political commissar of a guerrilla training mission in Kwang-Si Province. In May of 1941, after 30 years abroad, Ho finally returned to Vietnam. He went to the town of Pac-Bo on the northern border, where the Central Committee of the Indochinese Communist Party was to hold its eighth meeting. At this meeting, the party created the Viet Minh, a front organization intended to draw the support of Vietnamese who opposed the French, but were not yet Communists.

Upon his return to China in early 1942, he was imprisoned by a Chinese warlord, but released in 1943 to gather information about the Japanese units in Indochina. It was then that he took the name Ho Chi Minh (He Who Enlightens), returned to the northern part of Vietnam, and devoted himself to running the Viet Minh. Operating from the jungles of North Vietnam, Ho received aid from China and from the United States, fought the Japanese, and extended his influence throughout the area, building a firm infrastructure to support the Viet Minh.

By May 1945, he had managed to liberate six provinces from the Japanese and moved to assume control of the government. The puppet emperor Bao Dai abdicated on August 19 and, with both the Japanese occupation government and the French colonial government in complete disarray, Ho's National Liberation Committee proclaimed a provisional government with Ho Chi Minh as president. On September 2, Ho declared that the Vietnam Democratic Republic was an independent state and sought recognition from the United States, the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union and China.

The French, however, were determined to reestablish their colonial hegemony in Indochina. Talks with the French failed to produce a negotiated settlement, and French armed forces seized Haiphong and Langson in November 1946, initiating a war. Ho moved his government into the mountains of North Vietnam and began almost nine years of warfare, culminating in the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. The state of war actually simplified Ho's political problems. Vietnamese did not have to be Communist to join the fight against the French, and the ranks of the Viet Minh swelled with patriotic volunteers.

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Also, the real political opposition was easily squelched by declaring them to be traitors to Vietnam. By 1954, Ho was the undisputed leader of the country. The Geneva Accords of 1954 provided for a national election in 1956 to determine the fate of Vietnam, an election Ho confidently expected to win, especially since the bulk of Vietnam's population was in the North under his control. When the government of South Vietnam, which was not party to that portion of the agreement, refused to play into his hands, Ho created the National Liberation Front for South Vietnam and began the second phase of his war for a unified Vietnam.

First, however, Ho ruthlessly consolidated his power in the North. Evidencing the fact that behind his carefully constructed facade of the kindly and gentle ' Uncle Ho' he was in reality (in Susan Sontag's particularly descriptive words) a ' fascist with a human face,' Ho massacred his countrymen by the thousands in a Soviet-style ' land reform' campaign. In November 1956, when peasants in his home province protested, some 6, 000 were murdered in cold blood. With such actions, Ho proved he was a worthy contemporary of Lenin, Stalin and Mao Tse-tung, who had also built their empires with the blood of their countrymen.

By the time of his death on September 3, 1969, Ho Chi Minh was generally spoken of in the same breath as Lenin and Mao Tse-tung. He had certainly led his native Communist Party through almost 40 years of success, creating a state where none had existed before and devising a Communist government to run it. He was a national leader with strong internationalist credentials, having served the Communist Party throughout Europe and Asia for more than 20 years before his return to Vietnam. He led a Communist

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Party unique in that it had never had a major purge or a major theoretical dispute.

As a young Communist functionary, he avoided Stalin's great purges of the 1920s and 30s. As a mature Communist leader, he steered a middle course between the Russians and Chinese in their great schism, offending neither and retaining the support of both. In sum, Ho Chi Minh was that great contradiction: a dedicated Communist who was also a fervent nationalist. Throughout his life he never lost sight of his goal of an independent Vietnamese state, and even as a Communist leader he pursued an essentially Vietnamese course, even when pure Communist theory might have dictated other choices.

Yet there is no doubt that he was fully committed to the Communist ideal, that he accepted it completely in 1920, and that he never had second thoughts. Ho Chi Minh's Communist ideology was flexible enough to serve his purposes. In any case, he was never the doctrinaire, and always much more a political activist whose strong will was directed at the goal of the independence and unification of Vietnam. [pic] This article was written by Charles E. Kirkpatrick and originally published in the February 1990 issue of Vietnam Magazine. For more great articles be sure to subscribe to Vietnam Magazine today!