

## **Ho Chi Minh (1890-1969):**

### **Major Events in the Life of a Revolutionary Leader**

- 1890** On May 19, HO Chi Minh was born the second son to a family of farmers living in Kim Lien, a small village in Annam (Central Vietnam). He was born NGUYEN Sinh Cung but later adopted the name Ho Chi Minh (“He who enlightens”).
- When Ho Chi Minh was born in 1890, Vietnam was under French control. The French had split what is known today as Vietnam into three separate states — Cochin China (South Vietnam), Annam (Central Vietnam), and Tonkin (North Vietnam). In 1887, France combined these three states with Cambodia, also under French control, to form a federation of states called Indochina. Later, in 1893, Laos would also be incorporated into Indochina. Of the four states, France directly governed only Cochin China, but it indirectly controlled the other regions of Vietnam through a colonial administration that governed the entirety of Indochina as a single unit. The people living in French Indochina had little influence in the administration of their government and few rights. Vietnam was the jewel of the French colonial crown, providing ample natural resources and abundant cheap labor.
- 1907** After receiving a primary education at a local school, Ho and his brother traveled to the city of Hué to attend a prestigious Franco-Vietnamese academy. Three years later, Ho left the academy before graduating and worked briefly as a schoolteacher in the town of Phan Thiet.
- 1911** Ho traveled to Saigon and obtained a job as a cook aboard a French steam ship bound for the French city of Marseille. Although the details of his journey are not well documented, Ho spent the next two years traveling around the world, visiting cities in Europe, Asia, North America, and, according to some accounts, Africa and South America as well. Ho eventually settled in London.
- 1917** Ho moved to Paris during the height of World War I. He adopted the name NGUYEN Ai Quoc (“Nguyen the Patriot”) and became involved in leftist and anti-colonial activism.
- 1919** Ho worked to found the Association for Annamite Patriots, an organization composed of Vietnamese nationals living in France who opposed the French colonial occupation of Vietnam. He authored a petition demanding the end of the French colonial exploitation of Vietnam, which he attempted to present to the world powers at the Versailles Peace Conference held in the aftermath of World War I. His petition was never officially recognized, but his effort was well known in Vietnam.
- 1920** Ho became a founding member of the newly created French Communist Party.
- 1922** Ho founded the journal *Le Paria* (The Pariah), which served as a venue for anti-colonial activists to express and disseminate their views about the French colonial regime.

**1923** Ho traveled to Russia for the first time. After subsequent visits, he became acquainted with the most influential Soviet leaders including Nikolai BUKHARIN, Leon TROTSKY, and Joseph STALIN. While in Russia, Ho was trained as an agent of the Comintern\*. He studied the thought of Marx and Lenin as well as organizational and revolutionary techniques.

\*Founded in 1919 by Vladimir Ilyich LENIN in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution of 1917, the Comintern was dedicated to organizing an international socialist movement. Comintern agents were deployed throughout the world, promoting revolution, socialism, and organizing communist branch organizations abroad.

**1925** Ho traveled to China where he worked closely with Mikhail BORODIN, a fellow Comintern agent, to foment socialist revolution in China. While in China, Ho formed the Thanh Nien Cach Menh Dong Chi Hoi (“Revolutionary Youth League”), later known simply as Thanh Nien (“Youth”), an organization composed of Vietnamese exiles living in China and dedicated to revolution in Vietnam. As the Thanh Nien steadily grew in size, the organization began to establish connections with other Vietnamese nationalist and revolutionary groups residing in Vietnam. Thanh Nien also published the revolutionary journal *Thanh Nien*, which was secretly distributed throughout Southeast Asia.

**1927** Ho was forced to leave China after CHIANG Kai-shek, the leader of the Nationalist Party (Guomindang), instituted a vicious crackdown on left-wing radicals, imprisoning and executing hundreds of communists and labor activists. Ho fled to the Soviet Union. He spent the next few years based in Russia, but made frequent trips to China to recruit members for Thanh Nien.

**1930** In Hong Kong, Ho founded the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP), later renamed the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP).

**1931** Ho was arrested in Hong Kong by British authorities for his involvement in revolutionary activities and was imprisoned for two years. After he was released, Ho returned to Moscow where he would remain until 1938.

**1938** Ho traveled to China to serve as a military advisor for the Chinese Communist Party after the Japanese invasion of China in 1937. The Chinese Communist Party and the Guomindang, previously entangled in civil war, had agreed to an armistice until the Japanese were defeated.

**1940** German forces invaded France.

Japanese forces moved into Vietnam. French colonial authorities agreed to allow Japanese occupation under the condition that the French colonial administration not be dismantled.

- 1941** Ho returned to Vietnam for the first time since he left the country in 1911. There, he founded the Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh (“League for the Independence of Vietnam”), later known as simply the Viet Minh, an organization composed of Vietnamese nationalist and communist groups committed to Vietnamese independence. Throughout the Japanese occupation of Vietnam, the Viet Minh fought against both French colonial authorities and the Japanese forces occupying Vietnam.
- 1942** Ho was arrested by Nationalist Party (Guomindang) authorities in China and briefly imprisoned. Ho began to use the pseudonym Ho Chi Minh (“He who enlightens”) by which he is now remembered.
- 1945** At the close of World War II, Ho Chi Minh organized the Viet Minh to foment a large-scale uprising in Vietnam. The Viet Minh captured major cities across Vietnam and declared Vietnam an independent state. Vietnam became known as the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, and Ho Chi Minh became its first president.
- In July and August, the Allied Powers met in Berlin for the Potsdam Conference and agreed to partition Vietnam into a Northern and a Southern region. In the aftermath of the war, the administration of Northern Vietnam was temporarily given to Nationalist China while the administration of Southern Vietnam was temporarily given to the British. The British allowed French troops to reenter South Vietnam in the belief that retention of the profitable colony was essential to the recovery of the postwar French economy.
- 1946** Ho Chi Minh signed an agreement with the French that Vietnam be recognized as an Independent state, under the condition that it become of a member the French Union and permit a small French military presence. This agreement proved tenuous as tensions rose between French colonists and Vietnamese nationalists, eventually leading to full-scale war between the French and Vietnamese.
- 1951** The Vietnamese Workers Party (Lao Dong), the successor to the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP), was founded.
- 1954** Vietnamese forces defeated the French at at Dien Bien Phu, marking the collapse of French power in Vietnam. At the Geneva Conference, a meeting of the major powers involved in the region, it was decided that Vietnam remain divided into a Northern region, now under Viet Minh control, and the Southern region, under French control until a new South Vietnamese government could be established. With U.S. support, Ngo Dinh Diem was appointed Prime Minister of the fledgling government of South Vietnam. (Note: Although Ngo is the surname, this individual is commonly referred to as “Diem.”)
- 1955** The U.S. began giving military aid to the Diem regime. Driven into hiding by Diem’s repressive policies, communists living in South Vietnam organized into underground

- groups and began to wage guerrilla war against the Diem regime. These insurgents came to be known as the Viet Nam Cong San (“Viet Nam Communists”), or simply the Viet Cong.
- 1960** Communist insurgents in South Vietnam formed the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam, also known as the National Liberation Front (NLF). North Vietnam agreed to supply the NLF with military aid and support. While Ho Chi Minh remained president of North Vietnam, he withdrew from active decision-making due to failing health.
- 1961** The United States increased military aid to Diem. Diem began to institute brutally repressive measures against political dissenters, but remained unable to stamp out the Viet Cong insurgency.
- 1963** Diem was killed in a coup staged by military commanders who had lost faith in his ability to lead.
- 1964** American ships patrolling the Tonkin Gulf were allegedly attacked by North Vietnamese vessels. While this attack, known as the Tonkin Gulf Incident, was never reliably confirmed, the U.S. committed to full war against the communist forces in Vietnam.
- 1965** The U.S. began a full military campaign against the Viet Cong in South Vietnam. Direct U.S. involvement would last until 1973.
- 1968** In a large military strike known as the Tet Offensive, the Viet Cong retook many of the cities that had been under U.S. occupation, even pushing so far as to get troops inside the grounds of the American embassy in Saigon. While the Viet Cong sustained heavy losses, the offensive exposed the weakness of the U.S. and South Vietnamese forces, shifting U.S. public opinion and precipitating the U.S. seriously to consider withdrawing their forces from Vietnam.
- 1969** Ho Chi Minh died on September 2 at the age of seventy-nine.

### **Vietnam after Ho Chi Minh**

Due to domestic protests against U.S. military involvement in Vietnam, the U.S. slowly began to pull its forces out of Vietnam, completely withdrawing military support in 1973. Despite the massive U.S. bombing raids that had crippled the infrastructure of North Vietnam, the Viet Cong, now entirely under the direction of North Vietnam, continued to combat South Vietnamese forces. In 1975, North Vietnam launched a full-scale invasion of South Vietnam, routing its armies and toppling the South Vietnamese government. In 1976, the country was officially united under a communist government. After its reunification, Vietnam began to expand its influence in Southeast Asia, invading Cambodia, then moving into Laos. These aggressive actions strained Vietnam’s relations with China, which entirely

deteriorated after subsequent border disputes. In the postwar years, Vietnam forged an alliance with the Soviet Union, securing substantial Soviet aid to help rebuild its war-ravaged country and modernize its economy. Despite Soviet aid, the Vietnamese economy remained relatively stagnant. Today, while still controlled by a communist government, Vietnam has undertaken a number of economic reforms to promote international trade and stimulate its economy.

### **The Legacy of Ho Chi Minh**

There is perhaps no greater hero to Vietnam than Ho Chi Minh. He is remembered primarily for his lifelong battle against great odds to build an independent and unified Vietnam. Saigon, the former capital of South Vietnam, was renamed Ho Chi Minh City in his memory after its capture by North Vietnamese forces in 1975.

### References and Further Reading

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