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# Ho Chi Minh and the Vietnamese Struggle for Independence: A Historiographical and Instructional Capstone Project

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# HO CHI MINH AND THE VIETMAMESE STRUGGLE FOR INDEPENDENCE: A HISTORIOGRAPHICAL AND INSTRUCTIONAL CAPSTONE PROJECT

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The French Empire first began claiming territory in what they referred to as Indochina in 1858. Although Catholic missionaries had traveled extensively throughout the region beginning in the 17th century, it was not until the mid 19th century that France would begin actively colonizing the area. Over the next three decades, France would pacify and gain control over much of what they would name Indochina. Making up the area that roughly includes Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, the colony soon became vital to broader French financial interests. Indochina was rich in natural resources and gave France access to things like coal, tin, spices and tea. Rubber trees were also in great supply in Indochina and after the auto industry arrived in the early 20th century, rubber plantations became enormously profitable for the French.

The Vietnamese did not passively accept colonial rule, however. Rebellions and uprisings were not uncommon in the late 19th century and this resistance would grow greatly during World War I when Vietnamese men were conscripted into service in the French military. Despite the longstanding anti-colonial sentiment within Indochina, it was not until the occupation of France during World War II that a man named Ho Chi Minh would return from exile to create the Vietnamese Independence League (Viet Minh). Although Imperial Japan had been granted access to Indochina by the Vichy government Ho and his followers believed this was opportunity to finally begin their revolution. Ho spent nearly thirty years of his life outside of his country and it would take another thirty years of fighting for his dream of a united Vietnam to be realized. In the three decades that followed his return to Vietnam, Ho and the Viet Minh would directly confront and expel what they viewed as their foreign invaders: the Japanese, the French and finally, the Americans.

Few events of the 20th century loom larger in the current American political and social consciousness than that of the Vietnam War. A watershed moment in many ways, it marked the end of a perceived golden age in our nation's history and posed a major challenge to the long standing idea of American exceptionalism. Despite overwhelming resources and manpower, the full force of the greatest military power in the world was unable gain an advantage over the communist guerillas. Perhaps for the first time since becoming a world power, war in Vietnam caused Americans to confront its own hypocrisy, both at home and abroad, and in the eyes of many this era would forever undermine the credibility of the office of the President.

In order to understand Vietnam's path to independence as well as the nature of that struggle and the steadfast, almost bewildering, tenacity with which many of Ho Chi Minh's followers fought, one must understand the architect behind the movement. Gaining a deeper understanding of Ho Chi Minh's life, his character, and his political motivations is essential and inseparable to the study of Vietnamese independence. Through insightful reflection about the man whose life was defined by his determination to untether his country from foreign influence at all costs, one is able to gain a much deeper understanding of not only the wars his followers waged in search of freedom but the very nature of those conflicts and the ferocity with which they fought. He was a man widely respected for his intellect as well as his tenacity. He maintains to this day an almost god like status in Vietnamese culture but his reign was not without controversy. The Viet Minh were well known to ruthlessly put down any form of dissent whenever it arose. During the land reform program that began in 1954, atrocities were carried in the name of Ho's regime and thousands of people were executed, many of them wrongfully so. Ho's legacy is a complicated one but his effectiveness as a leader is difficult to disagree with.

Reasons for studying a man affectionately referred to by his people as "Uncle Ho" are easy to cite; however, verifiable sources about his life and motivations are not. Ho has been the subject of numerous biographical studies from authors from Vietnam and the Soviet Union. These works are not only hard to find but they are rarely, if ever, published in English. Furthermore, given the fact that these biographies were largely written under repressive Communist regimes, their credibility is highly questionable.

Charting the historiography of a single figure is a profoundly daunting task ripe with logistical obstacles and often skewed by authors' personal biases. As noted historian and historiographer John Tosh has pointed out in his book *The Pursuit of History*[1], biographies are often dismissed by academics as having no place in "serious" historical study. Although several of the arguments behind such a statement do indeed hold water, it is important to not lump all biographies into the same category. This is particularly true in the case of Ho Chi Minh, revolutionary leader of the Southeast nation of Vietnam.

In the United States and Europe, there have been two distinct periods of biographies dedicated to Ho Chi Minh and the division between them is attributable to the vastly different political landscape within which they were written as well as the amount of source material that was available to the writers. The earliest works were published while the American war in Vietnam was still raging. Given the ubiquity of the conflict in the politics and popular culture of that time it is not surprising that a market would develop for detailed information about the shadowy Vietnamese leader. Although Ho was still alive or just recently deceased when these works were written (he died in 1969), the amount of reliable information these authors had to work from was relatively small. This paucity of source material may indicate why the authors of

[1] John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History (*Harlow, UK: Pearson Education Limited, 1984)

the earlier works were written by well-respected former journalists rather than traditional academics. This is not to say, however, that these earliest authors lacked credibility to be taken seriously on the subject. Each one of them had extensive experience working and living in Vietnam and in some cases, knew Ho Chi Minh personally. They also provide significant insight into a man who few in the west knew anything about but cast an enormous shadow of the state of the world in the mid-late 20th century. While they would each go on to be successful non-fiction writers, none of these early authors were formally trained historians. This is significant in that the earliest biographies of Ho Chi Minh appear to be written with a great deal of personal bias intertwined with the facts about Ho's life. To varying degrees, each author is very sympathetic to Ho and omit or gloss over some of the darker and more controversial aspects of his reign.

It was not until 2000 that the second wave of Ho Chi Minh biographers began to emerge. While countless books and movies about the American war in Vietnam had been released in these interim years, little progress had been made in scholarship specific to Ho Chi Minh. This changed greatly as various archives of information slowly became more accessible to researchers. The first major development was the gradual opening of the French Colonial archives during the 1970s. This uncovered a great deal of information about Ho Chi Minh's earlier years of political activity while being tracked by French intelligence. The second and most significant development was the easing of restrictions to archives in the former Soviet Union that occurred during the 1990s. Although still not entirely available, the partial opening of the Comintern (International Communist Party) archives has been particularly useful to historians. And yet, despite all of the progress that has been made recently, one major potential resource remains closed off to outsiders: the Vietnamese government archives in Hanoi. The current administration that is in place evolved directly from the Democratic Party of Vietnam

that was created by Ho in 1945. As a result, the heroic, almost saint-like image of "Uncle Ho" remains a significant part of the party's propaganda apparatus and is carefully guarded.

Despite this significant obstacle, academics have been able to pull from a much broader array of sources in recent years allowing for the development of a deeper and more balanced level of understanding about Ho's life. The ability to convey newly uncovered information as well as confirm or refute previously held theories provided the impetus for new studies to be published. Although much about Ho's life and work is still unknown to even the most well respected scholars of Vietnamese and Communist history, an increasingly detailed and sophisticated understanding of his life and the details of his rise to power has emerged.

When Jean Lacouture's *Ho Chi Minh: A Political Biography*[2] was published in 1968, his biographical subject was ailing but still alive. The American military campaign in Vietnam was nearing its height and the war was growing more and more unpopular among American citizens and its European allies. As a journalist for the French daily newspaper, *Le Monde,* Lacouture had spent years as a correspondent covering Asian politics and Indochina in particular. Through the informational foundation he built over years working in Vietnam, Lacouture clearly thought of himself as uniquely qualified to be the first to attempt to bring a clear picture of Ho to a western audience.

The picture that materialized was likely in stark contrast to the manner in which many at the time saw the communist and anti-colonial leader. Lacouture put forward to his readers a glowing portrait of a pragmatic man who more than anything was a shrewd political operator and relentless proponent of independence for his people. Despite Ho's closely perceived association

[2] Jean Lacouture, translated by Peter Wiles, *Ho Chi Minh: A Political Biography* (New York: Random House, 1968).

with Mao of China, and to a lesser degree Stalin in the Soviet Union, and the brutal land reforms and overall treatment of dissidents that occurred under their reigns, Lacouture contended that Ho was less concerned with the international revolution promoted by the communist movement than he was with facilitating his own Vietnamese revolution. According to Lacouture, Marxist-Leninism was a means to an end for Ho: a blueprint which he felt could realistically be implemented in Vietnam and lead to the development of a self-sufficient nation. This is a stance that has been backed up and restated by numerous historians but it began here with Lacouture. This is not to say that Ho was not a devoted student of and advocate for communist doctrine. He believed capitalism was inherently flawed and incompatible with underdeveloped countries of Asia. According to Lacouture, Ho saw capitalism as only truly benefiting the elite of society and creating and nurturing a world economy that encouraged colonization and foreign exploitation.[3] The writings of Lenin, particularly on the subject of colonialism, resonated deeply with a young Ho and lead him to believe that a government based on Marxist-Leninist ideas was more applicable to the people of Vietnam.

This is a stance about Ho Chi Minh that has been almost universally echoed by subsequent biographers. Few, if any, authorities on Vietnamese history seem to disagree with the notion that Ho was beyond all else, including the goals of the International Communist Party, dedicated to liberating his people from foreign control making him a largely sympathetic figure. Beyond the often-expected reverence many biographers have for their subjects, however, Lacouture's work on Ho Chi Minh borders on hero worship. In his estimation the Viet Minh leader was not only misunderstood and underappreciated by the West, but a gifted and charismatic leader destined for the ages. He posited that Ho Chi Minh's ability to expel the

[3] Lacouture, *Ho Chi Minh: A Political Biography,* 187.

French and stand up to the vastly superior American military are testaments to his greatness as a leader and hails him as an "incomparable man of action."[4] One particular passage highlights quite clearly not only the argument Lacouture was trying to make throughout the book but also conveys the unbridled affection he has for his subject. "This ingenious empiricist, this prodigious maker of history brought his nation back to life, built a state, conducted two wars which were essentially wars of the oppressed. His fight against the French brought the liquidation of a great colonial empire. The one he is fighting against the United States shows the limits of technical power when it confronts the courage and determination of men."[5] This style of writing and the unambiguous bias behind it was prevalent throughout the book and raises some doubts about its serious academic credentials.

Lacouture utilizes various writings attributed to Ho, on a variety of subjects and from different time periods, in order to allow the man's own words to provide much of the substance for the story. There are high level letters written between Ho Chi Minh and French diplomats, letters between Ho and his Vietnamese and international communist contemporaries and numerous speeches as well as articles and pamphlet excerpts. Lacouture also drew heavily upon anecdotes written about Ho by those who interacted with him throughout his life, including Lacouture's own experiences meeting with the famously secretive leader. These brief stories and attributed quotations, although somewhat questionable in terms of authenticity, provide a glimpse into the human side of the man often referred to by followers as "Uncle Ho". In fact, it is difficult for an objective observer to not begin to get a better sense of the personal qualities that drew in and maintained the support of his followers. His legendary humility, his fierce intelligence and even his sense of humor are all on display throughout the book. These qualities,

[4] Lacouture, 4.
[5] Ibid., 5.

as well as the selfless patriot image he created for himself, would pave the way for the manner in which several other western biographies would tackle the topic moving forward.

Lacouture highlights these qualities in several ways and with great frequency throughout the book. When discussing a conversation Ho had with a French diplomat about taking a patient approach to gradual independence from France rather than aligning too closely with the Chinese, he quotes Ho as saying, "It is better to sniff the French dung for a while than to eat China's all of our lives."[6] Although such a quote is in and of itself not particularly significant, it does provide a degree of insight into certain qualities for which Ho has been widely praised. In such a small and intimate moment, Lacoture's use of this quote illustrates not only Ho's shrewdness and political savvy but also a sense of humor that made him well liked by many of those who met him.

Lacouture's work in crafting this biography was undeniably groundbreaking in providing a portrayal of Ho's life for a western audience but certain aspects of his work raise questions about its broad validity. Beyond the often overwhelmingly glowing descriptions of Ho's accomplishments, Lacouture's treatment of some of the more controversial aspects of Ho's time in power is also problematic. Not only does the book pay very little attention to the well-known brutality and heavy handedness often carried out by the Viet Minh on political enemies but even the passing acknowledgement of a darker side to the regime is glossed over in seemingly reverent terms.

Lacouture writes, "The fond uncle is quite capable of playing the heavy father when he wishes. In the north, his firm hand was felt by the anti-communist nationalists and Catholics between September 1945 and July 1946. And in the South, he dealt sternly with the Trotskyites and the Hoa Hao recalcitrants. Again, in 1955 and 1956 the land reform campaign was applied so

[6] Ibid., 119.

harshly that the diocese of Xa-Daoi in his own poor, proud native province of Nghe Tinh, birthplace of the 'Xo-Viets' of 1930 rose in rebellion once more; and this time they were rebelling not against the grasping mandarins or the invaders from the north of the French colonialists, but against the administration headed by their former savior."[7] This passage represents the bulk of Lacouture's mention of some of the more grim realities of life under Ho Chi Minh's rise to power and the brutality that was doled out against groups or factions that spoke or acted out against the Viet Minh agenda. It is passages like this that make this book, while undoubtedly useful in providing some background information about a man so little was known, difficult to take seriously at times.

Given the time period in which this book was written, it is not surprising that the author leaned heavily on just a handful of secondary sources to complete the biography. No one had attempted a mass-produced work purely about Ho up to this point making the book's very existence a charting of new territory for western authors. Given France's extensive history in the region, there were numerous French publications about Vietnamese history and the roots of modern Vietnamese nationalism. Such works are cited extensively throughout Lacouture's work, namely, Paul Mus' *Vietnam: Société* d'une garre,[8] Jean Sentiney's Histoire d'une paix manquée[9] and Philippe Devillers' Histoire du Vietnam.[10] Despite providing sound context about Vietnam in general there were no works specifically dedicated to Ho Chi Minh.

Following a somewhat similar career path to that of Jean Lacouture, David Halberstam also began his career as a journalist covering Vietnam for a major western newspaper. As a

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[7] Ibid., 210.
[8] Paul Mus, *Vietnam: Société* d'une garre (Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1952).
[9] Jean Sentiney, Histoire d'une paix manquée (Paris, De Saint-Claire, 1967).
[10] Philippe Devillers, Histoire du Vietnam: 1940-1952 (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1952).

young foreign correspondent for the *New York Times,* Halberstam arrived in Vietnam in the early 1960s. His insightful reporting while based in Saigon during the early days of American involvement in the region garnered him a Pulitzer Prize in 1964. Although not a formally trained historian, after returning to the United States Halberstam began his foray into publishing non-fiction with his 1965 book *Making of a Quagmire: America and Vietnam During the Kennedy Era.*[11] As the title and year of publication might indicate this was a critical look at some of the political and military misteps made by the Kennedy administration during the initial escalation in Vietnam from Halberstam's perspective on the ground. He would go on to publish the widely acclaimed 1972 *The Best and Brightest*[12] which, despite its initially misleading title, took aim at the blunders and missteps of the highly regarded scholars and intellectuals within the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. In between these two heavily critical books of American involvement in Southeast Asia, Halberstam published a relatively short biography of Ho Chi Minh simply titled *Ho* in 1971.[13]

Given the political tone of the time in which it was published as well Halberstam's well established personal views on the war and those in charge of it it should come to little surprise that *Ho* is more or less an Americanized version of Lacouture's *Ho Chi Minh: A Political Biography.* Written for the intended audience of "student or serious lay reader"[14] Halberstam takes a very similar stance as that of his French predecessor when it comes to the life and legacy of America's secretive and charismatic adversary. Even decades after the initial version of the

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[11]David Halberstam, *Making of a Quagmire: America and Vietnam During the Kennedy Era* (New York, Random House, 1965).
[12] David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest (*New York, Random House, 1972).
[13] David Halberstam *Ho (*New York, Random House, 1971).
[14] Halberstam, *Ho, 3.*

book was published, Halberstam wrote in a revised introduction for a later version about his disagreement with his editor about the portrayal of Ho that comes across in the book.

"My portrait was of Ho not as a great Marxist theoretician, but as a nationalist-pragmatist, a man who was most assuredly a Marxist, but was first and foremost a nationalist and a patriot...what distinguished Ho was not so much his mastery of the abstract, but his ability to turn the abstract into the practical and to embody the concept of revolution to his own people. He was stubborn and had his Ho; I was stubborn and had my Ho."[15] What comes through in this excerpt is striking for several reasons. Written decades after the book was originally published (2007) Halberstam, even with almost three decades to reflect on his work and after several more comprehensive and well documented biographies of Ho had been published, was unapologetic about the version of Ho Chi Minh that he wanted to the western world to see.

Whereas Lacouture raises but glosses over the stern and decisive manner Ho Chi Minh's regime dealt with dissent, Halberstam omits it almost entirely. Instead, his focus when it came to criticising internal Vietnamese politics, and deservedly so, the repressive actions of the American backed regime in Saigon. While Halberstam was more than willing to question and damn the policies of the South Vietnamese government as well as the direct policies of the American government he refused to acknowledge those of the government in Hanoi or the often appalling actions of Vietcong.

By the time the American war in Vietnam was in full swing Ho was more of a ceremonial figurehead than anything else. Throughout his life he had numerous health issues and these problems accelerated as he approached a more advanced age. The last few years of his life were spent in and out of Chinese hospitals with the day to day operations of the war and running of the

[15] Halberstam, Ho, x.

North Vietnamese government being left to his top lieutenants such as General Vo Nguyen Giap. Numerous authors are quick to point out how significant a role his leadership and personality played in shaping the admirable qualities of his revolution. The tenacity and determination of his followers and their unwavering commitment to the cause in face of overwhelming military superiority insurmountable obstacles are well documented. However, Halberstam refused to take the logical step of applying that same amount of influence Ho's personality had to the darker side of his movement. The torture and murder of dissidents and innocent peasants caught in the middle of a war leaving this work one sided and incomplete as a "serious" biographic study.

Much like Lacouture and Halberstam, the next author to attempt an early biography of Ho also had extensive and unique experience within Vietnam. Charles Fenn was not a historian by trade. Although he would work as a foreign correspondent for the Associated Press during the America war in Vietnam, he approached the topic of Ho Chi Minh from an extraordinary perspective. While Jean Lacouture had the opportunity to meet Ho on several occasions while working in Southeast Asia, Fenn had deeply rooted professional and personal relationship with him. As a US intelligence officer for the OSS during World War II, Fenn had worked as a liason for the American government assigned to cultivate a relationship with Ho and his followers. What began as a means to help retrieve downed American pilots in the thick jungles that cover much of the country gradually escalated, at the incessant insistence of Ho and his top lieutenants, to the arming and training of subversive guerilla forces against their common enemy.

While the story of their relationship is intriguing and sheds a great deal of light on Ho Chi Minh as a person during the latter stages of the Second World War, the biography Fenn wrote in 1973, *Ho Chi Minh*: *A Biographical Introduction* was greatly affected by not only

Fenn's personal politics but the close relationship he had with his subject. Published at a time when the American war effort was falling apart and the prospect of a favorable American outcome was all but lost, this book was an unabashedly sympathetic look at Ho and the cause of the Viet Minh. His primary goal in writing his book was not only to humanize a man reviled by much the United States at the time but to portray him in a similar light as the two preceding western biographers had: a misunderstood patriot and commendable liberator of his people. Through exploring not only Ho's driving principles for revolution but also the intensely complicated political world within which he navigated, Fenn brought his readers a reinforced version of the sympathetic portrait already put forward by Lacouture and Halberstam.

The sources Fenn leaned upon are not unsurprisingly almost identical to those utilized by Lacouture and Halberstam. Heavy use of Lacouture's biography and Halberstam's aforementioned *The Making of a Quagmire* can be seen throughout the book. This is not surprising, given the paucity of sources available at the time as well as the singular lens with which Ho was being portrayed. In fact, while the book spans only about 120 pages, the bibliography of sources used was strikingly scant even when one considers the limited amount of information available to him at the time. There is extensive use of the same French and Vietnamese secondary sources Lacouture utilized as well as many of the same speeches and writings created by Ho and his closest advisers. There are two notable exceptions, however, which - while historically dubious - do indeed shed new insight into a man few at the time knew anything about. One such exception was the use of some of Fenn's personal correspondence with Ho as well as personal anecdotes about time they had spent together. Another is the use of a dozen poems Ho Chi Minh had written while he was held in various Chinese prisons in the late 1930s. Although somewhat useful at fleshing out an overall picture of Ho Chi Minh's personality

and his state of mind during that period of his life, it is difficult to see the significant historical value gleaned from them when placed in the context of a serious biographical study.

Decades would pass until another significant biography about Ho Chi Minh was published and when William Duiker's 2000 *Ho Chi Minh: A Life* was released it marked not only a revival but a major shift in western scholarship on the topic of Ho Chi Minh. Although several English language biographies were indeed published during the American war, Duiker's biography was the first significant work dedicated to Ho Chi Minh that approached the topic with legitimate historical credentials. A former foreign service officer stationed in Southeast Asia during the early 1960s, Duiker returned to the United States to earn his doctorate before embarking on a thirty-year career as a history professor at Penn State University. Unlike some of those before him who attempted to trace Ho's life for a western audience, Duiker was able to combine his firsthand experience serving in Vietnam with sound historical training. He emerged as a leading expert on contemporary Vietnamese history and wrote several books about the rise of Vietnamese nationalism such as *Vietnam: A Nation In Revolution*[16] and *Sacred War: Nationalism and Revolution in a Divided Vietnam*.[17]

Aside from his credentials, the timing of this book's publication was also significant. While Duiker does not say so explicitly, it appears to be his opinion that many of the biographies that predated his were economically opportunistic and political in nature. Rather than serious attempts at scholarship, English language biographies published during the 1960s and 1970s scrambled to fill a demand in the American marketplace by providing superficial accounts, aimed at a mass audience, that "did not attempt to make detailed use of existing source

[16] William Duiker,*Vietnam: A Nation In Revolution* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1983).
[17] William Duiker, *Sacred War: Nationalism and Revolution in a Divided Vietnam* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994).

material."[18] Duiker also notes that several works were published within the Soviet Union and North Vietnam during and immediately following the war but that not surprisingly, these biographies "were all marred by a blatant effort to present their subject in mythic proportions, as a saint rather than a political figure, more caricature than reality."[19] As we have seen, this claim can be readily applied to several earlier attempts published for western audiences as well.

Not only did Duiker set out to dig deeply into the existing source material that was available during the war but the fall of the Soviet Union, subsequent easing of political tensions at the end of the 20th century and continued Vietnamese scholarship of Ho's writing opened a treasure trove of previously unavailable information. While access to certain information remained off limits to him at the time the book was published, for perhaps the first time, a bona fide western historian was able to do what historians are supposed to do: examine and evaluate newly verifiable sources and present them within the framework of existing scholarship.

Also in steep contrast to those biographers that came before *Ho Chi Minh: A Life*, Duiker does not skirt the issue of Ho's personal and professional contradictions. In fact, the enduring complexity and confusion behind such a controversial legacy was put forth as the central tenet of the book itself. Rather than present this work as a definitive account of Ho's life, this biography is posited as a humble attempt to make sense of many of these newly accessible sources (mainly personal correspondence, articles, and reports written by Ho in various languages) while remaining mindful of how much is still unknown and in some cases, unknowable. Ho was a man who relished the mystery surrounding his identity and he, as several biographies have noted, meticulously crafted the avuncular image of himself that was presented to his followers as well

[18] Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh: A Life* (New York:Hyperion, 2000) , 5.
[19] Duiker, 6.

as the outside world. How much of this was genuine and how much of this was manufactured and nurtured, Duiker concedes, is difficult to know for sure.

However, it is in this awareness of the unknown that the reader once again gets a sense for the historical superiority of this book over some of its predecessors. When discussing some of the more controversial and troublesome actions of Ho's regime, namely the Chinese and Soviet-inspired land reforms of the early 1950s, Duiker provided the most even-handed account to date. While seen as essential in the progression of Vietnam's transformation from exploited colony to independent communist state, the tactics used to reappropriate land from landlord to peasant was often overly aggressive and heavy handed. While the exact numbers are difficult to cite with any kind of certainty, thousands of innocent people were wrongfully or hastily imprisoned, tortured and executed in the name of revolution. Although Ho's direct involvement in the planning and implementation of the reforms remains unclear to this day, a portion of Duiker's writing on the subject when compared to Lacouture provides a great example in the difference in these two seminal works on Ho's life and how they approached their craft. Duiker clearly takes a more cautious and deliberate approach to the construction of Ho than his French predecessor. Although both men clearly have a great deal of respect and admiration for their subject, Duiker is much more careful in trying and leave his personal views from being at the center of the book. It is only in this fashion that a biographical study can ever be taken seriously and add some value to the field. As a well-established and respected historian, Duiker would have certainly understood that.

When explaining Ho's role in initially implementing the reforms, Duiker writes, "Ho Chi Minh's attitude toward the proposal has never been entirely clear, although it is likely that he had argued against any land reform program that would be so stringent that it would alienate

moderate elements throughout the country. In any event, the manpower needs of the revolution ultimately prevailed."[20] This is in stark contrast to Lacouture's words on the reaction within the halls of power once it became clear the reforms were being carried out too hastily and with unnecessary ferocity. He writes of Ho's role, "To what extent did Ho seek to apply the brakes to moderate? In this type of regime, once the leader has established personal ties to the masses he is automatically exempt from any public criticism of the system. It is those about him, his advisors and executives who have to bear the blame."[21] The difference in the approach of these writers is very clear from reading these two passages next to one another and speak to the divide between the two works much more broadly.

For Duiker, Ho was a realistic and shrewd politician who was firm in his beliefs but aware of the need for consensus building within his party. Lacouture, on the other hand, raised and then dismissed the question of culpability entirely. As the great "Uncle Ho", figurehead of the regime and man of the people, he was not only blameless but infallible. Whereas Duiker offers a measured and reasoned answer to the question, Lacouture raises and then instantaneously dismisses it.

Given the wealth of newly available sources around the turn of the 21st century it is not surprisingly that another historian emerged shortly after Duiker with another Ho Chi Minh biography. Temple University professor Sophie Quinn-Judge published *Ho Chi Minh: The Missing Years 1919-1941* in 2003. In both the approach and scope of this monograph we again see the drastic difference between the work of a well-trained historian and that of politically minded journalist turned non-fiction author. Rather than a focus on Ho's entire life and the

[20] Duiker, 446.
[21] Lacouture, 210.

compilation of a comprehensive biographical study, as Duiker had done, Quinn-Judge focused strictly on the years when Ho Chi Minh's movements and work is the most difficult to trace. Between his time in Paris following the Paris Peace Conference in the wake of World War I and his imprisonment at the hands of the Chinese nationalist government just prior to his long awaited return to his homeland, Ho was being actively surveilled by both French intelligence and Chinese Nationalists. While so much of Ho's life is difficult to piece together for a variety of reasons, tracing these years of countless pen names and the use of aliases and false identification papers have proven to be an obstacle to getting a full picture of who Ho Chi Minh actually was.

More so than any of the other previously reviewed works on Ho, including that of William Duiker, Quinn-Judge masterfully and meticulously confronts claims and images presented of Ho Chi Minh and his complicated legacy during this formative period in international communism. Aside from citing Duiker's work throughout her book, Quinn-Judge also utilizes many of the same significant primary and secondary sources utilized by other authors on the subject. This includes specific mention to the earlier work of Fenn and Lacouture, and carefully forges new ground as to Ho Chi Minh's influence within the International Communist Party (ICP). Quinn-Judge not only directly refutes previously published claims about Ho's physical activities, such as conferences he was said to have attended, but also contends that his overall influence within the ICP during this specific period has been overstated by supporters and detractors alike.

Citing many of the same newly available sources that were influential in Duiker building his comprehensive biography, Quinn-Judge found numerous writings previously attributed to Ho that were found to have been authored by others within the party and descriptions of party meetings in which his influence was exaggerated or inaccurate. The result was a study that shed

brand new light on an extremely influential period of Ho's life. By focusing specifically on the time he spent in exile and conducting a granular examination of his role within the Communist party, Quinn-Judge's book offers a detailed and focused study. The information found within the Comintern archives was of particular use to Quinn-Judge who was able to use them to tie together a much stronger and more definitive picture of Ho's movements and whereabouts, especially in the years leading up to his return to Vietnam in 1941.

While numerous arguments are put forward in this impressively researched study, the overarching theme that Quinn-Judge was concerned with appears to rest on the idea that Ho, while undoubtedly one of the most influential and misunderstood figures of his time, had a much less pivotal role within the ICP during the period before he returned to Indochina this than many have given him credit for. This claim is not in and of itself a surprise to those familiar with Ho Chi Minh's life and his motivations for a liberated Vietnam. Afterall, one of the most common threads that can be followed through western biographies of his life present a man far more concerned with anti-colonial struggle than Communist ideology. However, Quinn-Judge published the first English language work primarily concerned with his role within the international Communist movement with which he is often so closely associated.

Regardless of which study one may read about Ho and his life it is plain to see that he was not a person content being on the sidelines. He had traveled extensively as a young man to experience the world and understand many of the foreign cultures he held in high regard. From the beginning of his life until the end he worked tirelessly to study and experience all that he could to further the cause of independence. As was customary in Vietnamese culture during Ho's life, children were given a name at birth and then another one in early adolescent that was more indicative of the child's personality. Knowing what we do about his intense self-determination it

is no surprise Ho's father gave him the name "Nguyen Tat Thanh" which translates loosely to "he who shall succeed."

His work ethic and drive from childhood until his death remains unquestionable and makes one specific quote utilized by Quinn-Judge extremely poignant in illustrating her point about his lack of activity prior to his return to his homeland. Living in Moscow in 1938 he wrote to his superiors within the party, "Send me somewhere. Or keep me here. Use me in whatever way you judge useful. What I am requesting is that you not let me live too long without activity."[22] While this is not an explosive excerpt when standing on its own, it is one of many pleas Quinn-Judge pulls from Ho's writings while living in Moscow to be used by the ICP more proactively. He wanted to do more than study and pontificate about Marxist-Lenin theory, a practice that had led him to abandon the French socialists years earlier, and would not get his chance until he reentered his native land during World War II. Sophie Quinn-Judge was the most recent American to publish a biography dedicated to the life of Ho Chi Minh but a Frenchman would undertake the challenge for himself in 2007.

Thirty-five years after the publication of Jean Lacouture's *Ho Chi Minh: A Political Biography,* French historian Pierre Brocheux would publish his book entitled, *Ho Chi Minh: A Biography*. Although the amount of information available to researchers had increased exponentially since the end of the American war in Vietnam and even more so after the fall of the Soviet Union, the overall image of Ho is not markedly different in Pierre Brocheux's biography as it is in Lacouture's or Halberstam's. As would be expected, Brocheux draws from a much broader pool of sources than many of his predecessors were able to do in the 1960s and

[22] Sophie Quinn-Judge, *Ho Chi Minh: The Missing Years 1919-1941* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 219.

1970s and his argument about Ho and his motivations is more focused and refined. However, the core ideas and glowing affection for Ho remain largely compatible with earlier works. Like Lacouture and others, Brochauex sees his subject as a man who was primarily occupied with Vietnamese nationalism and not the worldwide communist revolution. For Brocheux, Ho is tragically underappreciated historical figure. The dedication of the book set an ominous tone for where the author was headed, "This book is dedicated to the idealists of the world, for whom history always ends in disappointment."[23] These words immediately give the reader a good idea of what Brocheaux thought about Ho and how he would attempt to narrate his life and frame his legacy for a 21st century audience. Much in the way that Halberstam's *Ho* reads a retread of of Lacouture's *Ho Chi Minh: A Political Biography* but with an American audience in mind, Brocheux's seems to do the same but for a modern one.

Also, like earlier biographers, Brocheux not only clearly reveres Ho but carefully strives to exculpate him from some of the hardline tactics of his party and broader communist movement. Through his extensive research and work with primary documents, Brocheux sees a man who was able to maintain an adherence to the confucian teachings of his youth and combine them with the Marxist-Leninist principles of his politics. Steadfast and tenacious, Brocheux likens Ho to Mahatma Gandhi in highlighting the "bold audacity" of their nature and early anti-colonial activity.[24] This more modern work does not compare to Lacouture's in terms of its hagiographic prose, however, as Brochuex makes it clear that Ho certainly had his flaws and was by all accounts a "normal man."

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[23] Pierre Brocheux, translated by Claire Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh: A Biography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), Dedication page.
[24] Brocheux, 178.

In fact, when attempting to have this work translated into Vietnamese, the process was halted by official calls to exclude portions about Ho's personal life (mainly in reference to his relationships with women[25]). This suggested "white washing" of Ho's story from the Vietnamese government was also imposed on William Duiker when his 2000 biography was likewise set to be translated into Vietnamese. According to Brocheux, both authors refused to comply and did without the translation.

Despite writing their respective portraits over three decades apart, Lacouture and Brocheux share many of the same central ideas when it comes to the kind of man Ho was, what motivated him and how he should be looked upon by the west. And although there was clearly a large discrepancy in the amount of information available to the two authors, they both take a very Van Rankean approach historiographically. While the story of Ho Chi Minh's life begins on the bottom rung of society and much of his life's work was inspired by Marxist ideas, the sources both authors refer to most frequently in order to flesh out the true nature of their subject are the various writings of diplomats and ranking government officials. Ho led an extraordinary life by any objectionable measure and both of these biographies set out to tell the story of an influential yet often misunderstood world leader through the use of countless official documents.

Beyond many of the similarities between Brocheaux's work and that of the earliest Ho biographers and their views, however, both subtle and conspicuous differences exist. First and foremost is in the writing style of each. Lacouture's relentless and unrestrained praise for Ho, for example, is egregious at times. Although many of the insights provided are fascinating they were often clouded by the flowery language that surrounded them. Moreover, Lacouture sees Ho Chi Minh as a unique figure born for the moment within which he found himself. "What other

[25] Brocheaux, xiv.

revolutionary of these times would have defied the existing powers with such obstinate perseverance?.”[26] His book is filled with proclamations similar to this one that touch upon Ho’s unique greatness and political cunning.

This is where another main diversion between Lacouture exists. Brocheux undoubtedly venerates Ho and sees his life as worthy of deeper understanding. However, rather than a man born for greatness, Brocheux sees him more as a man of circumstance who rose to meet the challenges that faced his country during his lifetime. Brocheux writes, “His behavior was determined by the urgency and constraints imposed upon him by various situations, for Ho Chi Minh was a man of situations.’[27] These authors tried to make sense of a man about whom so much is still unknown. Despite their differences in prose and being separated by a veritable ocean of available source material, both Brocheaux and the earliest Ho Chi Minh authors reach a similar conclusion about Ho and they do so by using similar sources in similar ways. This was a man who has been misjudged by many in the west and whose legacy deserves to be separated from the communist tyrants he is regularly associated with.

Although he died of heart failure in 1969, piecing together a complete and nuanced portrait of Ho Chi Minh’s life remains a work in progress. The fact that two easily distinguishable eras of western study dedicated to Ho exist is readily apparent to anyone looking through the very limited universe of such texts. In the first era, roughly from 1968-1973, American and European works were extraordinary limited in scope and reliant upon a very small amount of verifiable information. Furthermore, the first few writers who did attempt to cultivate a portrait of Ho Chi Minh appeared to have been largely inspired to do so and guided by their

[26] Lacouture, 4.
[27] Brocheux, 187.

own personal politics. While authors Lacouture, Halberstam and Fenn each had extensive experience living in Vietnam and were all well respected as writers, the result of an era of scholarship dominated by journalists rather than historians was a number of simplified and overly sympathetic works that relied on speculation to fill in the gaps caused by a limited pool of source material. There was very little effort on the part of these first wave authors to hide or disguise their political, anti-war bias and the overall narrative of their biographies was affected by it. Although it is important to appreciate the contribution these earliest works made in the forging of new ground, when compared to the work done by the second wave authors, namely Duiker and Quinn-Judge, the earlier works are markedly inferior.

In the foreseeable future it is hard to imagine that historians will add anything of significance to what was published during the early 2000s. Thus far, books about Ho Chi Minh have been clustered and directly reliant on the amount of verifiable information available to researchers at any given time. Because there still remains at least one major source of potentially brand new information about Ho Chi Minh, the Vietnamese government archives in Hanoi, there is reason for optimism that a third era of scholarship will emerge someday. While it is difficult to speculate what kind of information could be held in Hanoi, anyone interested in post-colonial Vietnamese history dreams of a day when those restrictions are lifted.

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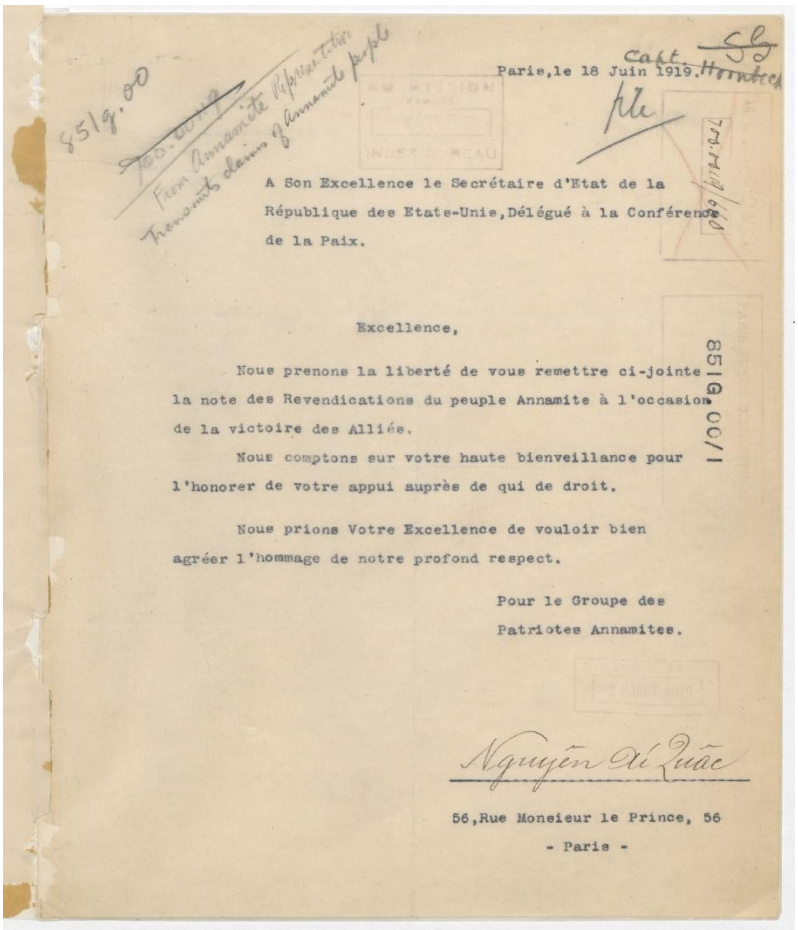
**Headnotes:**



Paris, le 18 Juin 1919.

A Son Excellence le Secrétaire d'Etat de la République des Etats-Unis, Délégué à la Conférence de la Paix.

Excellence,

Nous prenons la liberté de vous remettre ci-jointe la note des Revendications du peuple Annamite à l'occasion de la victoire des Alliés.

Nous comptons sur votre haute bienveillance pour l'honorer de votre appui auprès de qui de droit.

Nous prions Votre Excellence de vouloir bien agréer l'hommage de notre profond respect.

Pour le Groupe des Patriotes Annamites.

Nguyễn Ái Quốc

56, Rue Monsieur le Prince, 56
- Paris -

https://www.docsteach.org/documents/document/ho-chi-minh-lansing

***Translation***:

To his Excellency, the Secretary of State of the Republic of the United States, Delegate to the Peace Conference.
Excellency,
We take the liberty of submitting to you the accompanying memorandum setting forth the claims of the Vietnamese people on the occasion of the Allied victory.
We count on your great kindness to honor our appeal by your support whenever the opportunity arises.
We beg your Excellency graciously to accept the expression of our profound respect.
For the group of Vietnamese Patriots
[signed] **Nguyen Ai Quoc**
56, Rue Monsieur le Prince, 56
-Paris-

***Note***: The name signed here, **Nguyen Ai Quoc**, translates to "Nguyen the Patriot." This was one of the many names Ho Chi Minh used throughout early and midlife.

Ho Chi Minh viewed the United States as an inspirational example of anti-colonial revolution. America's colonial history combined with Woodrow Wilson's "Fourteen Points" gave Ho, and other nationalists around the world, reason to be optimistic that the U.S. would be an ally in

establishing a post-colonial world. Ho appealed to American officials on numerous occasions seeking their help in brokering a peaceful end to French colonialism but without success. His first known attempt was this telegram (dated 6/18/1919) to Secretary of State Robert Lansing while President Wilson was in Paris to negotiate the terms of peace following World War I. Although Ho received word that the petition would be shared with President Wilson directly, there was no further response and it remains unclear whether or not Wilson ever read the message.

https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/09/vietnam-paris-nguyen-ai-quac-le-paria-french-left-de-gaulle

**Ho Chi Minh (stading, third from left) pictured with members of the American Office of Strategic Services (OSS) in Tan Trao August, 1945).**

With France considerably weakened by World War II, Ho Chi Minh returned to Vietnam in 1941 after almost three decades in exile. With much of the country under Japanese rather than French control, Ho and his followers began working closely with the American OSS (later renamed CIA) providing assistance to American military operations in the area. In addition to rescuing downed American pilots, Ho and his followers provided intelligence on Japanese movement and disrupted railroad operations and supply routes when possible. Also picture in the photograph is Vo Nguyen Giap (center right, wearing suit and tie) Ho's longtime lieutenant. Despite having no formal military training (he had previously worked as a history teacher) Giap would earn the tabloid nickname "red Napoleon" as the architect of Vietnam's wars against both the French and the Americans.

**I.** Open covenants of peace, openly arrived at, after which there shall be no private international understandings of any kind but diplomacy shall proceed always frankly and in the public view.

**II.** Absolute freedom of navigation upon the seas, outside territorial waters, alike in peace and in war, except as the seas may be closed in whole or in part by international action for the enforcement of international covenants.

**III.** The removal, so far as possible, of all economic barriers and the establishment of an equality of trade conditions among all the nations consenting to the peace and associating themselves for its maintenance.

**IV.** Adequate guarantees given and taken that national armaments will be reduced to the lowest point consistent with domestic safety.

**V. A free, open-minded, and absolutely impartial adjustment of all colonial claims, based upon a strict observance of the principle that in determining all such questions of sovereignty the interests of the populations concerned must have equal weight with the equitable claims of the government whose title is to be determined.**

**VI.** The evacuation of all Russian territory and such a settlement of all questions affecting Russia as will secure the best and freest cooperation of the other nations of the world in obtaining for her an unhampered and unembarrassed opportunity for the independent determination of her own political development and national policy and assure her of a sincere welcome into the society of free nations under institutions of her own choosing; and, more than a welcome, assistance also of every kind that she may need and may herself desire. The treatment accorded Russia by her sister nations in the months to come will be the acid test of their good will, of their comprehension of her needs as distinguished from their own interests, and of their intelligent and unselfish sympathy.

**VII.** Belgium, the whole world will agree, must be evacuated and restored, without any attempt to limit the sovereignty which she enjoys in common with all other free nations. No other single act will serve as this will serve to restore confidence among the nations in the laws which they have themselves set and determined for the government of their relations with one another. Without this healing act the whole structure and validity of international law is forever impaired.

**VIII.** All French territory should be freed and the invaded portions restored, and the wrong done to France by Prussia in 1871 in the matter of Alsace-Lorraine, which has unsettled the peace of the world for nearly fifty years, should be righted, in order that peace may once more be made secure in the interest of all.

**IX.** A readjustment of the frontiers of Italy should be effected along clearly recognizable lines of nationality.

**X.** The peoples of Austria-Hungary, whose place among the nations we wish to see safeguarded and assured, should be accorded the freest opportunity to autonomous development.

**XI.** Rumania, Serbia, and Montenegro should be evacuated; occupied territories restored; Serbia accorded free and secure access to the sea; and the relations of the several Balkan states to one another determined by friendly counsel along historically established lines of allegiance and nationality; and international guarantees of the political and economic independence and territorial integrity of the several Balkan states should be entered into.

**XII.** The turkish portion of the present Ottoman Empire should be assured a secure sovereignty, but the other nationalities which are now under Turkish rule should be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development, and the Dardanelles should be permanently opened as a free passage to the ships and commerce of all nations under international guarantees.

**XIII.** An independent Polish state should be erected which should include the territories inhabited by indisputably Polish populations, which should be assured a free and secure access to the sea, and whose political and economic independence and territorial integrity should be guaranteed by international covenant.

**XIV.** A general association of nations must be formed under specific covenants for the purpose of affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike.

http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/wilson14.asp

**Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points**

In a speech delivered to the United States Congress on January 8, 1918, President Woodrow Wilson put forth "Fourteen Points" that he thought should serve as an outline for promoting a lasting peace. Reeling from the unprecedented carnage caused by World War I, Wilson was addressing what many saw as a need for a new sense of order in the world. Among the principles advocated by Wilson in this proposed world view was the importance of self-determination, the ability for a people to govern their own country free from external influence. Often referred to as the "Wilsonian Moment," this speech inspired a wave of momentum for budding nationalistic movements in colonized territories throughout the world. The reality, however, is that overwhelming evidence suggests that Wilson and his advisors had only been referring to Europe when calling for self-determination and in no way meant for the Fourteen Points to apply to those under colonial rule.

http://www.postcolonialweb.org/singapore/arts/painters/vietnam/nguyenkhang/1.html

**"Uncle Ho Visiting the Villages" by Nguyen Khang. 1958. Original size: 36 x 75in.**

This painting was part of a 1996 exhibit at the Singapore Art Museum entitled, "Modernity and Beyond: Themes in Southeast Asian Art." The work's bright colors and vivid detail help to convey the mythical hero status Ho Chi Minh held for many of his countrymen. Affectionately referred to as "Uncle Ho" by his followers, he was seen as a tireless and selfless defender of their freedom. Every aspect of his life from his speeches to his humble lifestyle and frail physical appearance combined to cultivate the ultimate 'man of the people' persona. While disputed in certain parts of the country today, Ho is largely looked upon in a similar light to that of George Washington in the United States. And although Americans have long since accepted that Washington was an imperfect man who owned slaves and could in fact tell a lie, Ho's idealized public image is carefully maintained by government officials to this day.

"All men are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among them are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."
This immortal statement was made in the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America in 1776. In a broader sense, this means: All the peoples on the earth are equal from birth, all the peoples have a right to live, to be happy and free.
The Declaration of the French Revolution made in 1791 on the Rights of Man and the Citizen also states: "All men are born free and with equal rights, and must always remain free and have equal rights."
Those are undeniable truths.
Nevertheless, for more than eighty years, the French imperialists, abusing the standard of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity, have violated our Fatherland and oppressed our fellow-citizens. They have acted contrary to the ideals of humanity and justice.
……...
For these reasons, we, members of the Provisional Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, solemnly declare to the world that Vietnam has the right to be a free and independent country—and in fact is so already. The entire Vietnamese people are determined to mobilize all their physical and mental strength, to sacrifice their lives and property in order to safeguard their independence and liberty.

http://www.oxfordfirstsource.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199399680.013.0249/acref-9780199399680-e-249

**Excerpts of Ho Chi Minh's 1945 Declaration of Independence speech. Hanoi, 1945.**

On September 2, 1945, Imperial Japan surrendered to the Allies formally bringing an end to World War II. On that same day, hundreds of thousands of people filled Hanoi's Ba Dinh square to witness Ho Chi Minh declare a newly independent nation. Opening his speech by quoting Thomas Jefferson's immortal passage from the Declaration of Independence (1776), as well as the French Declaration of Rights of Man (1791), Ho declared the formation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Although a devout follower of the teachings of Marxist-Leninism, Ho has been widely defined as being a patriot first and a communist second, and actively sought a good relationship with the United States in the decades leading up to the Vietnam War.

**Textbook Critique:**

When looking through references to Ho Chi Minh in the global history textbook, *World History: Patterns of Interaction* (1999), one cannot help but come away disappointed. Although it is important when to bear in mind not only the age of the intended audience of this book (in this case, 10th graders) but also the enormous amount of information a teacher of a global history course is responsible for covering, the framing of Ho Chi Minh in this particular work leaves much to be desired.

With the exception of one glaring omission, the amount of space devoted to Ho feels appropriate. He is introduced in the second paragraph of a section on the Vietnam War within a chapter entitled "Restructuring the Postwar World." While this is in no way surprising, a strong case can be made that students would be well served to see Ho's name appear in the much earlier chapter that covers the Paris Peace Conference of 1919. While *Patterns of Interaction* of course mentions Woodrow Wilson's "Fourteen Points" and the corresponding concept of "self-determination" it does so very briefly and without reference to the fact that Wilson did not mean for this to apply to the colonized world. It would be useful for students to learn the sobering reality behind such seemingly noble ideas and perhaps even mention some of the historically significant non-western figures that were inspired but ultimately disappointed by Wilson's high-minded rhetoric. The textbook could offer names such as Mao Zedong of China or Jawaharlal Nehru of India to bolster this section; however, a reference to Ho Chi Minh, who was in Paris in 1919, would be all the more powerful. By introducing Ho in this earlier chapter, when he tried in vain to solicit support from the Wilson administration, students would be able to see the roots of America's disastrous involvement in Vietnam decades later.

This becomes particularly apt when looking at the sentence within which Ho is first mentioned in the text. While dispensing the basic context behind western involvement in Indochina, the book states:

> A young Vietnamese nationalist, **Ho Chi Minh**, turned to the Communists for help in his struggle. (p 868)

While this is a fair introductory sentence, some background knowledge of how and why Ho 'turned to the Communists' would make for a much richer understanding of the situation and the role the United States played in it. The section continues on to offer broad information about France's colonial presence in the region in the early 20th century as well as the brief period of Japanese control during World War II. As for Ho specifically, there are numerous references to his anti-colonial activities as well as the fact that he was forced to flee the country; however, the timeline they sketch out is very misleading.

> During the 1930s, Ho's Indochinese Communist party led revolts and strikes against the French. The French responded by jailing Vietnamese protests. They also sentenced Ho, the party's leader, to death. Ho fled his death sentence but continued to inspire Vietnam's growing nationalist movement from exile. Ho returned to Vietnam in 1941, a year after the Japanese seized control of the country. (p. 868)

While it is difficult to convey such a long and complicated period of time concisely, the above excerpt makes it seem as though Ho personally organized and carried out this anti-French activity from inside of Indochina. The reality is that while Ho was one of the founders of the Indochinese Communist party and he did inspire a lot of Vietnamese nationalist activity throughout this period, it is well documented that he did so mostly from Moscow, China and

Thailand. Although he travelled extensively and under numerous aliases, there is no evidence that between 1919 and 1941 he was ever able to safely travel back inside of his native country.

Ho is mentioned three more times in the body of this section. The first instance is in reference to the definitive battle of Dien Bien Phu (1954) when the French were effectively defeated and forced to abandon Indochina. The former colony was split up and Vietnam was temporarily divided into two different governments along the 17th parallel. The textbook appropriately explains that the popularity of the northern government under Ho far exceeded that of the western-supported regime that was put into place in the south. It also accurately shows that the American government supported the cancellation of a scheduled unifying election due to fears that Ho would win by a landslide. American interference in Vietnamese politics paid a significant part in shaping this era and while it is good that the cancelled 1956 election is mentioned, students would be better served with more information about the political instability in the south.

The next mention of Ho Chi Minh is a very brief reference to the land reforms instituted by his regime. Interestingly, the controversial measure is described as simply the "popular program of land redistribution" (p. 868), which makes it seem as though this was a crowning achievement for the Viet Minh. Although the overhaul of farmland ownership in North Vietnam was indeed considered successful in terms of distributing land to millions of peasants throughout the predominantly rural country, thousands of people were wrongfully arrested, tortured and murdered as a result. While certainly popular with large sections of the population, it also sparked violent revolts in certain pockets of the country and is considered a black eye on Ho's legacy. If the authors of this textbook felt it necessary to mention the land reforms at all they

should have dedicated more effort to explaining what exactly the policy was and the grim reality of its implementation.

Finally, several paragraphs later, Ho's final mention comes in simply mentioning his support of the Viet Cong guerillas fighting in the south. It could perhaps be elaborated on or explained that the North Vietnamese regular army (NVA) also actively participated in fighting at times but in general is information that may be better suited for a deeper dive on the topic in an American history course.

Aside from the specific mentions of Ho Chi Minh within the text of this rather short (2 pages) section, there is a stand alone textbox that accompanies these pages about Vietnam that provides some further information under the heading "History Makers." Although very brief, this is an important addition to the section on Vietnam and by its very inclusion in the chapter allows students to gain a deeper sense of the enormity of Ho's influence over this time period.

The text reads as follows:

**History Makers**
**Ho Chi Minh**
**1890-1969**

When he was young, the poor Vietnamese Nguyen That (uhng-wihn thaht) Thanh worked as a cook on a French steamship. In Visiting American cities where the boat docked, such as Boston and New York, he learned about both American culture and ideals.

He later took a new name - Ho Chi Minh, meaning "he who enlightens." But he held onto those American ideals. Though a Communist, in announcing Vietnam's independence from France in 1945, he declared, "All men are created equal."

His people revered him and fondly called him Uncle Ho. However, Ho Chi Minh did not put his democratic ideals into practice. From 1954 to 1969, he ruled North Vietnam by crushing all opposition.

While the inclusion of this excerpt and the picture that accompanies it were a pleasant surprise while reviewing this textbook, the substance of the information included in it is largely

inadequate. Translating his name and mentioning the fact that he was fondly referred to by his followers as "Uncle Ho" are indeed interesting tidbits of information. However, the section reads as if the authors were unsure as to what exactly they wanted to convey about their subject and the result is a missed opportunity to add some real depth to the chapter. Was the goal of this added section to write a very brief biography? Was it simply to add some interesting facts that bolster students' broad understanding of Ho? Was it to add some nuance to the study of a complicated man with a disputed legacy? It is hard to tell because what ended up being presented is a jumbled mess of random facts. Furthermore, the insistence of the authors to reference Ho's interest in American culture is puzzling. It is true that Ho quoted the American Declaration of Independence when announcing Vietnam's independence but the wording of this section seems more of an attempt at referencing American exceptionalism than anything else. Ho also quoted the French Declaration of the Rights of Man in the same document and some historians view the inclusion of iconic American and French documents were more of a clever appeal for western sympathy than anything else. Ho was a well read and well travelled man who did indeed take inspiration from the French and American revolutions; however, the inclusion of the lines about American values in this section are misleading and unnecessary.

The 'History Maker' excerpt ends on a somewhat strange note in mentioning that Ho Chi Minh crushed all internal opposition while in power without any further elaboration. This is the only comment about Ho's reign that could be construed as negative anywhere in the entire textbook and seems out of place. When looking at this along with the half of a sentence about the land reforms, it appears as though the authors could have patched these two things together and provided some interesting insight into the darker side of Ho Chi Minh's life and time in power.

It is a very difficult task to compress a man like Ho Chi Minh's life down to a few hundred words in any truly effective way. Given the scope of the content in the textbook, *Patterns of Interaction* dedicates a surprising amount of time discussing Ho's life and rise to power. However, much of the content is misleading or simply the statement of basic facts. There is no clear sense of his reign or his legacy and no real idea of who this man was after reading it. Through the addition of Ho's experience with the "Wilsonian Moment" at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, the crafting of a more carefully constructed narrative about his life and an emphasis on lasting historical significance this section would be greatly improved.

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**Textbook Citation:**

Beck, Roger and Holt McDougal. *World History: Patterns of Interaction.* Orlando, Florida: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing, 1999.

**New Textbook Entry:**

*{This section would accompany the section on the Treaty of Versailles and Woodrow Wilson's "Fourteen Points."}*

**The "Wilsonian Moment"**

The concept of national self-determination had a significant impact on many emerging anti-colonial movements throughout the world. Wilson's call for "a free, open-minded, and absolutely impartial adjustment of all colonial claims" was viewed by many under European control as a reason to believe there was a place for them in the postwar world. Nationalist, anti-colonial leaders in countries like Egypt, India, China, and Vietnam found a great deal of hope in Wilson's rhetoric and looked to the American president as an ally in their struggle for independence from foreign control. The subsequent wave of anti-colonial nationalism throughout the third-world has come to be known as the "Wilsonian Moment."

Vietnamese nationalist **Ho Chi Minh**, who would later become America's chief adversary during the Vietnam War, was in Paris in 1919 and attempted to meet with Wilson and his advisers to discuss the prospect of American support for Vietnamese Independence (then under control of the French).

*{Image of Ho's letter to Secretary of State Robert Lansing with accompanying caption}*

Although the "Wilsonian Moment" inspired independence movements throughout the world, Wilson's intentions were tragically misunderstood by those outside of Europe. Despite phrases like "equitable claims of the government" and "independent determination" in choosing one's own form of government, Wilson had no intention of voicing or extending American support to those struggling for independence in Africa or Asia. The focus of these comments was

actually specific to parts of Europe where a messy territorial landscape had emerged following the collapse of several long standing empires such as **Austria-Hungary.**

**War in Vietnam**

*{The following section would appear in a broader chapter on the Cold War and how it manifested itself in numerous conflicts throughout the world. The section about Vietnam would come after a section about the American war in Korea and a brief description of the Bay of Pigs invasion and Cuban Missile Crisis.}*

**The Road to War**

French Indochina (modern day Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia) was officially established as a French colony in the late 19th century. Although there had been numerous protests and minor uprisings against French occupation throughout their time in the region, Vietnamese **nationalist** movements became more common during the early 20th century following World War I. Like many other European colonies, Vietnamese natives were forced to serve the French war effort in Europe. Out of the roughly 100,000 Vietnamese that were forced into duty, 30,000 never returned home.

A young and dedicated Vietnamese nationalist named **Ho Chi Minh** made it his life's purpose to rid the country of colonial rule. He was driven into exile at a young age and would travel much of the world before settling in Paris. An avid reader, Ho was greatly interested in various revolutionary writings from around the world (including the United States, France and the Soviet Union) gaining inspiration from each of them. He was particularly intrigued by the work of Vladimir Lenin and came to see Communism as the most realistic path for Vietnam to build an independent nation.

Although far from home, Ho published various newspapers and pamphlets promoting Communist ideas and inspiring anti-colonial protests within Vietnam. His writings and movements were carefully monitored by French intelligence leading Ho to live an extremely

secretive existence. He often published his work under various pen names as well as in several different languages. This intense secrecy under which he lived would continue for the rest of his life.

Ho eventually fled France and traveled to the Soviet Union in 1923. Posing as a Chinese merchant named Chen Veng, Ho was able to make it to Moscow where he would further his Communist education and become more involved in Communist International often referred to as the **Comintern**. He would remain in exile from his homeland, travelling mostly between Moscow, China and Thailand, until 1941 when he decided it was time to return.

With France itself occupied under the Nazis during World War II (1939-1945), Ho Chi Minh and his closest followers crossed the border in southern China and snuck back into Vietnam. Although France was unable to wield any sort of control over the country during these years, Imperial Japan had moved into the region to access natural resources (like oil, tin and rubber) and increase their foothold on the Asian continent. Because of this, Ho and his small band of devoted followers were forced to live hidden in the vast jungles and caves north of Hanoi while trying to organize more support among the Vietnamese people. It was during this time period that Ho began working with the American OSS (later renamed the CIA) to help rescue downed American pilots and undermine Japanese military activity in the area.

After the Japanese surrendered to the Allies in 1945, Ho immediately seized the opportunity and his followers, now known as the Vietnamese Independence League (**Viet Minh)**, took over government buildings throughout the country. On September 2, 1945, in a speech given to hundreds of thousands of people in Hanoi's Ba Dinh square, he proclaimed the establishment of the **Democratic Republic of Vietnam**. However, France had every intention of reclaiming their resource rich colony and returned to retake control over the country. Ho sent

several letters to **Harry S. Truman** seeking official recognition for his newly formed nation and assistance in negotiating with France but he never received a response.

While French forces were largely able to pacify and reestablish control in Vietnam's urban areas, the rural majority of the country strongly supported Ho and the Viet Minh. Eventually, all out war broke out between France and the Viet Minh (French Indochina War: 1946-1954). In a conflict that would in many ways foreshadow the American experience in Vietnam, French military operations were able to inflict substantial casualties against the Viet Minh. However, after years of fighting and little to show for it, the war became increasingly unpopular to the French population back home. Finally, in 1954, a major French garrison in **Dien Bien Phu** was surrounded and cut off from reinforcement or resupply. After almost two months of fighting, the French had no choice but to surrender. For many historians, the defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu marked a significant turning point for the once great powers of Europe. After centuries of exploiting territories throughout the world, Europe's colonial empires were beginning to crumble.

{Insert *section about the American policy of containment, the "domino theory" and the Geneva Accords of 1954*}

**Vietnam - A Divided Country**

The country was now temporarily divided along the 17th Parallel with a Communist government in the north headed by Ho Chi Minh and a western-backed regime in the south led by **Ngo Dinh Diem**. The Geneva Accords had scheduled a unifying election to take place after two years and the United States and France hoped to use that time to build support for their anti-communist puppet regime in the south. Diem, however, proved to be a corrupt and brutal leader while Ho Chi Minh and his party remained incredibly popular among the nation's peasant population. Knowing he would lose the election, Diem and the United States cancelled it and the

countries remained divided. It was estimated by numerous sources that had the reunifying 1956 election been conducted as planned roughly 80% of voters would have favored Ho and the Viet Minh.

{A replacement "History Makers" textbox to accompany the section above}

**History Makers**
**Ho Chi Minh (Born Nguyen That Thanh)**
**1890-1969**

Ho Chi Minh ("he who enlightens") left his homeland in **1911** aboard a French ocean liner working as a cook's helper. He traveled the world for several years living and working odd jobs in Boston, New York, London and Paris. While in France, Ho became politically active in the Vietnamese nationalist movement. In **1923** he travelled to Moscow to further his study of Communism and his mission of liberating his native Vietnam under a Communist regime.

For decades he travelled between the Soviet Union, Thailand and China using various pseudonyms (said to be anywhere between 50-100 throughout his life). He spoke and published in several languages including Vietnamese, English, French, Chinese, and Russian. Although a devout follower of the teachings of Marxist Leninism, Ho is thought by many leading historians to have been a nationalist first and a Communist second.

Ho declared Vietnamese independence at the end of World War II in **1945.** In his declaration he quoted both the American Declaration of Independence and the French Declaration of Rights of Man directly. Ho's dedication to Vietnamese independence at any cost led his followers to freedom but at an enormous cost. After decades of fighting, the Vietnamese had ousted the French colonialists and defeated the United States but millions had died along the way.

As he ominously told a French diplomat prior to the **French-Indochinese War**, "You can kill ten of my men for every one I kill of yours. But even at those odds, you will lose and I will win."