

# Ho Chi Minh (1890–1969)

## The Struggle Continues

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1969

LIBERATION NEWS SERVICE — Ho Chi Minh died, after fifty years of struggle, still undefeated fighter for Vietnamese independence. Why is it that his death now seems so disturbing?

There has been no lack of pre-packaged homage for the man whose stature as a revolutionary leader is matched only by a handful of men in this century. Moreover, as one whose personal history embraced the broad sweep of international communism from the October Revolution to the present, as well as the entire twentieth century struggle in Vietnam, Ho has appeared to many of us more as an institution than an individual; and his own death, like his personal life, has not received much attention from the Movement.

In the last era of his life, when the great world wars between imperial systems were superseded by the third world war against a global imperialism guided by the United States, the person of Ho Chi Minh has in fact, achieved an almost perfect identification with the war of national liberation which he led.

Perhaps because the end of this war is not in sight, and the worst of it behind us, (and behind Ho), we mark the passing of the man lightly. But it makes us think twice about the nature of his fight, and we are disturbed. For there were elements to his revolutionary nationalism, namely its internationalism, which those of us who inhabit the heartland of the Empire are tempted to forget.

“The nation has its roots in the people,” wrote Ho in an introduction to “Twelve Recommendations” addressed to cadre and soldiers in early 1948.

If the study of this reality formed the basis for the development of an extraordinarily flexible and disciplined People’s War in Vietnam, then the study of the international reality of imperialism formed the basis for Ho’s relentless cultivation of an international “People’s War” against U.S. imperialism.

The difference between his father’s generation of nationalists and his own was, in fact, that Ho saw from the beginning that Vietnam’s struggle would be ultimately decided within a political arena that would embrace most of the world’s people and nations.

Nothing less than participation in a global political struggle would give Vietnam’s interest the direction and weight their realization would require.

Ho Chi Minh’s search for this participation took him on a familiar voyage. Drawn by Wilson’s postwar pontifications on national self-determination, he went first to the Palace of Versailles in 1919. Rebuffed here, he moved easily into exile circles in Paris where together with other colonials he pamphleteered earnestly on the evils of French oppression.

From this platform he moved into French Socialist circles, and in 1920 was one of the founding members of the French Communist Party when it split off from the Socialist Party in 1920 at the Congress of Tours.

“At that time I supported the October Revolution only instinctively,” he wrote retrospectively in 1960... “The reason for my joining the French Socialist Party was that these “ladies and gentlemen”...had shown their sympathy toward me, toward the struggle of the oppressed peoples. But I understood neither what was a party, a trade union, nor what was Socialism or Communism.”

The turning point came when a comrade gave him Lenin's "Thesis on the National and Colonial Questions."

From then on, by studying Marxism—Leninism, parallel with participation in practical activities, Ho determined that the struggle for national independence could not be realized without linking it with what he fully believed at the time was to be an international struggle of the oppressed nations and working people throughout the world against colonial and capitalist exploitation.

Not only was revolutionary communism to be a weapon—it was to become, as Ho matured, the ultimate expression of the movement for national liberation.

For over thirty years, Ho was to lead a liberation struggle as if it were an embodiment of not only the most exalted ideals of the Leninism he learned in the Third International, but of the universal aspirations of all men for independence and freedom.

In 1945, when his provisional government was ready to proclaim its sovereignty, Ho found the American Declaration of Independence just as serviceable as anything he had learned in the Soviet "University of the Toilers of the East."

However, the arena in which Ho fought has only infrequently approximated his vision. In the most crucial phases of the long war of independence Ho has essentially had to toil alone.

The history of Soviet and Chinese indifference to the Vietnamese struggle against French colonialism is well known, and it is safe to say that the two great socialist powers emerged visibly united on the Vietnam question when at the conference table in Geneva they combined to convince Ho that a compromise settlement was necessary to avoid the very real threat of a full-fledged possibly nuclear intervention by the United States.

On the very eve of the Vietminh victory over France (in 1945), the following revealing exchange took place between Ho and Joseph Starobin, an American journalist who visited him in his mountain cave in Northern Tonkin.

"Under what conditions do you foresee that France will consider peace?" Starobin asked. Ho replied simply "When they are beaten." And in the same interview he noted: "We are fighting an aged imperialism which is being bought for dollars by a young imperialism. Yes, but we shall beat them both."

In his informal statements then Ho acknowledged that revolutionary nationalism, much less international communism, would not necessarily and inevitably win.

Only the victories of the people who dared would give those movements real force.

When the "young imperialism" of the U.S. for example, aimed its immense guns on South Vietnam, only the early and unexpected victories of the nascent National Liberation Front dragged the Soviet Union (after the fall of Khrushchev) into support.

China's political support was guaranteed by its official espousal of wars of national liberation, but the very espousal (as epitomized in Lin Biao's "Long Live the Victory of People's War" which insists that revolution cannot be exported and must be carried out by the masses within the oppressed nation itself) precluded substantial material assistance.

In what must be viewed as a heroic and ingenious feat of political statesmanship, Ho Chi Minh has managed to make of the Vietnam resistance the one zone where the two socialist giants are forced to combine their enormous strength in support of a single irreproachable cause.

Moreover, Ho has also managed to transform the geopolitics of the third world into more than a symbolic fighting wedge against the global ambitions of the U.S. air war. North Vietnam has demonstrated to all the underdeveloped countries of the world precisely what the U.S. aggression was designed to refute: namely that resistance to armed American imperialism is not only possible, it is winnable.

Ho's struggle to internationalize the political arena of the Vietnam struggle has of course, not stopped with the socialist bloc and the third world. It has extended to the mass of people in the United States as well.

Here, too, Ho's realism has been grounded not on any inevitable law of Leninist anti-imperialism, but on the concrete impact of his people's victories on the political and economic substructures of the U.S. government.

The reality of this calculation finally realized itself in the eyes of the Vietnamese in the aftermath of the 1968 Tet offensive. Then, (all too briefly) Johnson's war machine stood isolated and confused before the public and the world.

Finally, before his death, what did Ho see when he surveyed the international arena in which both sides are so deliberately calculating their moves?

In the South, an important political victory was embodied in the formation of the broad-based Provisional Revolutionary Government in June of 1969, but like Ho's own provisional government formed in 1945 in Tonkin, final unification and consolidation will only happen after the heavy fighting still ahead comes to an end.

On the military front, Ho saw a defeated counterinsurgency operation super-ceded by a limited or "local" war whose defeat in the 1968 Tet offensive has in turn been accompanied by a desperate turn toward a "Vietnamization" of the war.

In practice, it is a move back to the first stage. NLF strategy is now simply to fight an offensive war of attrition against U.S.-Saigon troops, who are tied down defensively and in superfluous numbers on a few scattered bases and major cities.

Yet here too the nature of such a war of attrition, given the vastly superior resources of the United States over France, will make it a long one.

Finally, on the international front (and specifically on the political front inside the United States) the picture is genuinely ambiguous.

The truth is that the United States government has managed to follow its military defeat in South Vietnam with a series of political victories over its opposition forces at home. This has allowed the U.S. to prolong the war so long that defeat is actually transformed into a kind of stalemate which military reality did not really allow.

Not all of Washington's political fortunes since the spring of 1968 have been as deliberate as Johnson's manipulation of the national elections, and the propaganda which Harriman injected into the Paris "battlefield." Some were clearly fortuitous.

The murder of Robert Kennedy, the emergence of Eugene McCarthy, and the assassination of Martin Luther King which led the movement into greater preoccupation with racism—these were opportunities taken by the Administration to defer its reckoning in Vietnam and to consolidate its bargaining position in Paris.

Even today, with the talks discredited, with sounds of renewed antiwar activity in the air, there are many questions: Does the political development of the American movement allow it to see with clarity that the defeat of U.S. imperialism in Vietnam is in fact the most important way that the movement can demonstrate that it (not the government under Democratic or Republican control) is the force which has the interests of the American people at heart, and that it is the revolutionary movement which has the capacity to fight for the people and with the people?

Do the leaders of that movement fully comprehend the importance of such a defeat for our capacity to wage effective class struggle against the entire military-corporate complex on which the war rests?

What disturbs us is that we must admit that Ho died before this phase in the international struggle against U.S. imperialism in which he played such a decisive role has been resolved.

# fifth Estate

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<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/88-september-18-october-1-1969/ho-chi-minh-1890-1969>  
Fifth Estate #88, September 18-October 1, 1969

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