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*From Wilsonianism to Leninism:
Ho-Chi-Minh's Transition from Liberalism to Communism*

ABSTRACT: *Scholars debate how and why Ho-Chi-Minh (1890-1969), despite an early interest in the ideals of liberal democracy, could become the leader of North Vietnam and fight against the United States of America to unify Vietnam under his own communist regime. On the basis of oral histories, letters, government documents, political biographies, and speeches, this article argues that HCM's interest in the ideology of communism was consistent from an early point in his life and nurtured by the individuals he met and dealt with throughout his career, the political events he experienced, and the things he read and wrote himself.*

KEYWORDS: *modern history; Vietnam; France; U.S.; Ho-Chi-Minh; Woodrow Wilson; Vladimir Lenin; colonialism; liberalism; communism*

Introduction

In June 1911, as summer was arriving in French Indochina's colonial territory of Vietnam, a young man took a job as a cook on a French steamship, which allowed him to leave his home country for the first time and travel the world. He eventually settled in Paris, where he was introduced to liberal democracy, socialism, and anti-colonialism. As time went on, he began to assume a more active role in the political arena, voicing his opinions on political theory and invoking individuals like U.S. President Woodrow Wilson as sources of his political inspiration. The American Revolution greatly influenced this young Vietnamese nationalist because, just like Vietnam, the United States of America had once been a colony. Wilson's argument that all people, including those under colonial rule, had a right to self-governance heavily factored into his ideology. Yet even though this young man was interested in American history and politics, once he returned to reclaim his home country for the people of Vietnam, he did so as a communist guerrilla fighter. His name: Ho-Chi-Minh (1890-1969), also known as HCM, the leader of North Vietnam who would fight a long and deadly war against the United States to unify Vietnam under his own communist regime.

One wonders how HCM, once a supporter of liberal democracy, could steer his country toward a Leninist style of communism to achieve his anti-colonial goals to free his home country of Vietnam. Although he did support democracy to an extent, HCM had always displayed an interest in what would later be known as Marxist-Leninist socialist philosophy—a philosophy used to establish brutal dictatorships in places like Russia, China, and Cuba. To better understand HCM's transition and what made him into one of the twentieth century's most influential political figures, this article discusses his political and philosophical inspirations between 1919 and 1968. Using a thematic rather than chronological approach, it argues that HCM's interest in the ideology of communism was consistent early on and nurtured by the significant individuals he met and dealt with throughout his career, the political events he experienced, and the things he read and wrote himself throughout his lifetime.

The historiography on HCM tends to focus on three main aspects. The first main aspect pertains to the political events that transpired during his life. Scholars single out two particular incidents, arguing that they were the main factors that drove HCM into the arms of communism. The first incident is a letter he wrote in 1919 to U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, demanding the Vietnamese people's independence from French colonial control. According to historian William Duiker, "Ho Chi Minh's identification with that petition thrust him into the public eye for the first time and launched him onto a revolutionary career that would span five decades,"¹ namely, because he never received a response from the 28th U.S. President. Due to HCM's avid support of Wilson's ideas, historians view this unanswered letter as something that first pushed him toward communism. The second incident that pushed HCM toward communism was Vietnam's independence after World War II. Readers of HCM's 1945 speech will quickly realize the similarities between his words and the American Declaration of Independence of 1776. Political scientist Son Ngoc Bui argues that "Ho Chi Minh's Declaration of Independence is a form of anti-colonial constitutionalism because it contrasts the colonialists' constitutional commitments to the colonial reality in Vietnam."² While historian James M. Lindsay maintains that HCM quoted the American Declaration of Independence to gain credibility with the United States and other democratic countries,³ other scholars, such as Nguyen Trong Phuc, view the lack of support Vietnam received from the United States as the final prompt for HCM's transition toward communism.⁴

The second main aspect in the historiography on HCM concerns itself with the political influences to be gleaned from his readings and writings. There is a consensus that HCM, during his youth, was greatly influenced by American ideologies and literature, especially Wilson's "Fourteen Points" (1918) and idea of self-determination. Erez Manela's monograph, *The Wilsonian Moment*, and Fredrick Logevall's study, *Embers of War*, argue that HCM preferred Wilson's idea of self-determination above all other contemporary political philosophies; Manela takes this a step further and compares other countries' reactions to the idea of self-determination.⁵ Ken Burns, too, mentions HCM's liberal-democratic beliefs in his

¹ William J. Duiker, "In Search of Ho Chi Minh," in *A Companion to the Vietnam War*, ed. Marilyn B. Young and Robert Buzzanco (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Company, 2006), 19-36, here 20.

² Son Ngoc Bui, "Anticolonial Constitutionalism: The Case of Hồ Chi Minh," *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 19, no. 2 (2018): 197-221.

³ James M. Lindsay, "Remembering Ho Chi Minh's 1945 Declaration of Vietnam's Independence," *Council on Foreign Relations*, September 2, 2016, [online](#), accessed June 14, 2022.

⁴ Nguyen Trong Phuc, "Ho Chi Minh on Independence and Freedom: The Unity between National and Human Rights," *Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung*, August 29, 2019, [online](#), accessed June 14, 2022 (first published 2016 in volume 11 of *Political Theory: Research Journal and Scientific Voice of Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics*).

⁵ Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014; first published 2007); Fredrik

documentary, *The Vietnam War*, pointing to the similarities between America's and Vietnam's respective Declaration of Independence and claiming that HCM was still very much influenced by American political literature before his conversion to communism.⁶ In his article, "Behind the Mind of Ho-Chi-Minh," Joel Kindrick disagrees with this assessment, makes the case that communist writings by Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin had influenced HCM as early as 1920, and draws attention to an article in the Soviet communist newspaper *Pravda* after Lenin's death (January 21, 1924), in which HCM claimed that Lenin, "[a]fter having liberated his people, [...] wanted to liberate other peoples too,"⁷ thus showcasing his interest in socialist politics at a young age.

Finally, the third main aspect in the historiography on HCM addresses how he was influenced by the people he met as an essential factor why he began to lean toward communist ideology instead of American democratic ideology. In his article, "The Myth of the Wilsonian Moment," Brett Riley points out that HCM, during his time in France in 1919, was part of the International Union of Socialist Youth later known as the French Communist Party (FCP). Based on Reilly's research, the members of this organization influenced HCM to see communist policies in a more positive light.⁸ Furthermore, scholars are well aware of HCM's meetings with famous twentieth-century communist leaders, including Mao Zedong and Nikita Khrushchev, who helped solidify his communist ideology.

To illustrate HCM's transition toward communism, this article analyzes critical primary evidence in support of the claim that HCM was open to communist ideology at a young age. It employs oral histories, letters, and government documents, including Wilson's "Fourteen Points" (1918), HCM's letter to Wilson (1919), and Lenin's "Draft Theses on National and Colonial Questions" (1920), as well as various political biographies and speeches. In terms of its methodological approach, it is a contribution to political history, focusing on the political influences and key events that occurred during HCM's lifetime in order to assess his transition toward communism.

I. Personal Influences

In 1961, HCM traveled to Moscow to meet with Nikita Khrushchev, the then Prime Minister of the Soviet Union. A filmed recording of the spectacle shows HCM and Khrushchev greeting each other like old friends, exchanging hugs, and kisses on

Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* (New York : Random House, 2012).

⁶ *The Vietnam War*, TV documentary series, directed by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick (ARTE, Florentine Films, PBS Pictures, 2017).

⁷ Joel Kindrick, "Behind the Mind of Ho Chi Minh: How Communist North Vietnamese Leader Ho Chi Minh Developed His Thoughts and Theories on War," *HistoryNet*, November 5, 2019, [online](#), accessed June 14, 2022.

⁸ Brett Reilly, "The Myth of the Wilsonian Moment," *Wilson Center*, June 17, 2019, [online](#), accessed June 14, 2022.

the cheek.⁹ Despite this seemingly friendly greeting, the reality of the situation was much more severe, as HCM had come to Russia to discuss the falling out between the Soviet Union and Communist China. According to a declassified 1971 document from the CIA, titled “Khrushchev on Vietnam,” the Soviet Prime Minister was impressed with how HCM conducted himself, given the controversy surrounding him as he pursued a non-partisan policy between the Soviet and Chinese governments.¹⁰ HCM was quite aware that he was considered a small fish in the eyes of both the Soviet Union and China, but he was a valuable ally to both factions nonetheless. His stance toward both sides was clear and appealed to their values, but they did not compromise the priorities of Vietnam. HCM’s charismatic personality and considerable influence in the communist community allowed him to maintain a bipartisan position, which, in turn, enabled him to secure both financial and military support from the Russian and Chinese governments. This support afforded HCM additional security as a war between the United States and North Vietnam was becoming increasingly likely. To understand the trajectory that led HCM to communism, it is essential to evaluate how his early development under French colonialism created the man he is known as today.

HCM was born on May 19, 1890, in Cù m di tích Hoàng trù, Vietnam, to a family of farmers. He received his primary education at a local school and worked briefly as a school teacher in the town of Phan Thiết. It appears that he had a relatively normal upbringing.¹¹ However, living under French colonialism in a rural, agricultural setting must have left a deep impression on the young HCM. He witnessed the hypocrisy of the French who had repeatedly revolted against their own government in the name of freedom, but were now suppressing their colonial subjects. Nonetheless, HCM was greatly inspired by the ideas of liberty and equality that had been promoted by both the American and French revolutions. He spent the majority of his young-adulthood abroad, and his travels took him to several locations across the globe, including the United States and England. HCM continued to expand his education by learning several languages, such as Chinese, Russian, and French. In 1917, at the height of World War I, the twenty-seven-year-old HCM settled in France.

⁹ RetroFootage, “Ho Chi Minh Visits Khrushchev in Moscow, and Josip Tito in Yugoslavia, Speaks at a Party Congress Meeting in Moscow in 1961, Attempts to Mend Relations between the Soviets and Red China, Narrated by U.S. Journalist Walter Cronkite in 1966,” video clip D378_30_406, *Dissolve*, [online](#), accessed June 14, 2022; full feature, *YouTube*, [online](#), accessed June 14, 2022.

¹⁰ *Declassified Intelligence Analyses on the Former Soviet Union Produced by CIA’s Directorate of Intelligence*: document number 16278, titled “Khrushchev on Vietnam,” published January 6, 1971, accession number NN3-263-99-001 11, declassified December 1998, 3 pages, status RIF (“released in full”), [online](#), accessed June 14, 2022.

¹¹ “Ho Chi Minh (1890-1969): Major Events in the Life of a Revolutionary Leader,” timeline, *Expanding East Asian Studies: A Program of Columbia University*, [online](#), accessed June 14, 2022; see also “Ho Chi Minh (1890–1969),” in *Encyclopedia of United States National Security*, ed. Richard J. Samuels, 2 vols. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Reference, 2006), 1:325-326.

In France, he encountered several individuals who helped solidify his political beliefs. By 1919, he had joined a political group known as the *Groupe des Patriotes Annamites* – Vietnamese patriots who were pursuing the cause of liberating their home country from French colonial rule. Other prominent members of the *Groupe des Patriotes Annamites* whom HCM interacted with included Nguyễn An Ninh and Phan Chu Trinh. Both men played a vital role in shaping HCM’s future.

Nguyễn An Ninh (1900-1943) later became a well-known Vietnamese journalist. According to Kevin Pham’s dissertation, it was Ninh’s goal to promote Vietnam’s national identity via a notion of “national shame.” Pham analyzes Ninh’s speeches and writings, noting that Ninh “wanted his countrymen to feel ashamed about Vietnam’s past and present intellectual weakness, but this was supposed to motivate them to become ‘great men’ rather than drive them to despair.”¹² One prominent example in Pham’s dissertation is a 1924 newspaper article, “*Idéal de la jeunesse Annamite*” (i.e., “The Ideal of Vietnamese Youth”), in which Ninh states, “as India and Japan provide thinkers and artists whose talent or genius radiates alongside the talents and geniuses of Europe, Annam (Vietnam) is still only a child who does not even have the idea or the strength to strive toward a better destiny, toward true deliverance.”¹³ Ninh argued that, since Vietnam was a relatively young country, its people needed to do better to be respected globally, and remaining a colony would only hinder this endeavor.

Phan Chu Trinh (1872-1926) had a different approach in pursuing the agenda of the *Groupe des Patriotes Annamites* to advocate for Vietnam’s independence from France. Trinh argued that a European-style democracy would be the best way for Vietnam to overcome France’s colonial rule. He called for an end to the monarchy and its replacement with a democratic republic. Trinh also was a strong advocate for Confucianism, arguing that the lack of Confucianism in their country had been caused by tyrannical monarchs, which had ultimately led to the colonization of Vietnam by the French.¹⁴ Trinh believed that a European-style democracy, mixed with Confucianism, would be the best way for Vietnam to gain its freedom, as both the ideals of democracy and Confucianism promoted individualism. Trinh referred to other Asian countries, such as Japan, to further his claims. In a letter, “*Monarchy and Democracy*,” Trinh stated that, “[i]n the face of the expansion of European civilization to East Asia, it is only Japan that was able to abandon the Old Learning and adopt the New Learning, and within a mere forty years it was able to join the ranks of the world powers.”¹⁵ Trinh pointed out that for Vietnam

¹² Kevin Pham, “The Cosmopolitan Nation: Vietnamese Comparative Political Theory” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Riverside, 2020), 54.

¹³ Nguyen An Ninh, “*Idéal de la jeunesse Annamite*” (Ideals of Annamite Youth), reprinted in the newspaper *La Cloche Fêlée* (Saigon), 7, 1924, quoted in Pham, “Cosmopolitan Nation,” 54.

¹⁴ Kevin D. Pham, “Phan Chu Trinh’s Democratic Confucianism,” *The Review of Politics* 81, no. 4 (2019): 597-620.

¹⁵ Phan Châu Trinh, “*Monarchy and Democracy*,” in Phan Châu Trinh, *Phan Châu Trinh and His Political Writings*, trans. and ed. Vinh Sinh (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 125-140.

to grow and progress, it needed to adopt new teachings and ideologies while abandoning some of its old traditions.

It is possible that Nguyễn An Ninh, Phan Chu Trinh, and other members of the *Groupe des Patriotes Annamites* were discussing their ideas and arguments with HCM during their joint time in France. Conceivably, HCM supported the idea of Vietnam building up its national identity, and he also may have favored the call for strengthening democratic and Confucian ideals in Vietnam. It certainly seems that he incorporated Ninh's and Trinh's ideas, and that he viewed both as mentors.

In fact, both men's influence is noticeable in HCM's request to U.S. President Woodrow Wilson,¹⁶ in which he appealed to the United States to support Vietnam's freedom of speech and expression. At this point in time, communism was widely recognized as a global philosophy. HCM was well informed about the revolution in Russia, and he was inspired by Lenin's works. It would seem that going to the United States for help would be the last thing a communist would do, as the United States stood against the very idea of communism. Following Russia's October Revolution of 1917 and various anarchist bombings, America had just experienced its first "Red Scare," which had been marked by a widespread fear of far-left extremism, Bolshevism, and anarchism. Thus, HCM's letter to Wilson indicates that he was at least somewhat open toward the ideals of liberal democracy during his early years. This, however, would begin to change after the Treaty of Versailles (1919) and the defeat of the Central Powers.

To HCM, the Treaty of Versailles would have reflected a lack of U.S. support for Vietnamese independence. Accordingly, he became disillusioned with the United States and the ideals of liberal democracy and took his first steps toward becoming a Marxist-Leninist communist. He joined several socialist groups in France to further his political career and became more active in advocating for socialist policies. In December 1920, he attended a congress of the French Socialist Party (which would later become the French Communist Party). At this meeting, several individuals encouraged HCM to become more involved in the communist movement in France and around the world, among them Marcel Cachin (1869-1958) and Ludovic-Oscar Frossard (1889-1946), both French politicians and founding members of the French Communist Party. By this time, HCM had become a vocal supporter of Lenin, claiming that "[o]nly Lenin's thesis and the communist system will establish among all countries a universal republic."¹⁷ Both Cachin and Frossard noticed HCM's passion for Lenin's style of communism, and they encouraged it because the French Communist Party (FCP) was modeling itself after Lenin's socialist-policies approach. Given France's hold over non-

¹⁶ "Letter from Nguyen ai Quac [Ho Chi Minh] to Secretary of State Robert Lansing," June 18, 1919, National Archives at College Park, Record Group 256 (Records of the American Commission to Negotiate Peace, 1914-1931), General Records 1918-1931, file unit 851G.00, [online](#), accessed June 14, 2022.

¹⁷ Cited in Reilly "Myth of the Wilsonian Moment."

communist unions, FCP leaders were able to grow their organization by claiming that they were the “Party of the Working Class.” The FCP’s success allowed HCM to flourish and express his ideas on the benefits of a communist utopia while simultaneously opening doors for his next political opportunity.

This opportunity arose in 1924 when HCM became acquainted with high-ranking communist leaders at a communist congress in Moscow, including Nikolai Bukharin, Leon Trotsky, and Joseph Stalin. HCM had been eager to meet his idol—Lenin—and was saddened by the news of his passing, stating: “Lenin was our father, our teacher, our comrade, our representative.”¹⁸ Yet the men he met in Moscow undoubtedly reaffirmed HCM’s belief in communist ideology, and being acquainted with them afforded him the opportunity to be trained as an agent of the “Communist International” (or “Comintern”).¹⁹ Agents of the Comintern were members of a global organization that advocated for world communism.²⁰ As an agent of this organization, HCM trained to overthrow governments of the bourgeoisie (i.e., the dominant social class in Marxist theory) and establish Soviet-style governments. It is in this program that HCM learned the guerrilla fighting tactics he would later use to wage war in his own country.

As HCM continued to travel around the globe, he met other individuals who inspired him. In 1941, while he was in China prior to his return to Vietnam, HCM created the Viet Minh,²¹ a communist guerrilla fighting force that was joined by individuals who looked up to HCM and who strengthened his conviction that communism was the most effective way to end colonialism in Vietnam.

II. Impactful Political Events

In addition to the influential people he met throughout his life, several politically charged events caused HCM to evaluate and, in some cases, dramatically change his course. Among these was his first protest against French colonialism, because, as a result of this protest, he would leave Vietnam from 1911 until 1941. It all began in 1908 when HCM was dismissed from the National Academy in Hué after he had participated in a protest against French colonial rule.²² Following this dismissal, he moved to Phan Thiết where he worked as a teacher for three years. Even at this young age, it was evident that HCM was a politically motivated individual, and experiencing imperial colonialism firsthand provided him with an outlet for his political energy. In 1911, he was hired as a cook on a French steamship. From there, he spent two years dabbling with political ideologies, most

¹⁸ Cited in Pierre Brocheux, *Ho Chi Minh: A Biography*, trans. Claire Duiker (New York: Cambridge University Press), 24.

¹⁹ “Ho Chi Minh (1890-1969),” timeline.

²⁰ Antoine Capet, “Comintern,” in *Berkshire Encyclopedia of World History*, ed. William H. McNeill, Jerry H. Bentley, and David Christian, 5 vols. (Great Barrington: Berkshire Publishing, 2005), 2:392-393.

²¹ William J. Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh: A Life* (New York: Hyperion, 2001), 45-50.

²² Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh*, 150.

notably Western democracy and communism, but he came to favor socialism. As we have already seen, while in France, he joined several socialist organizations. It is safe to say that, had HCM not been dismissed from the National Academy in Hué over anti-colonial protests, his life would have turned out rather differently. His decision to leave his home country ultimately set him on a path that impacted the history of both Vietnam and the United States.

A key event during HCM's lifetime was the end of World War I and the subsequent peace conference at Versailles. Hoping to seize the moment, on January 18, 1919, HCM sent a letter to U.S. Secretary of State Robert Lansing, intending for Lansing to pass the letter on to U.S. President Woodrow Wilson. In his letter, HCM demanded that the French government grant the people of Vietnam, among other rights, "Freedom of press and speech; Freedom of association and assembly; [and] Freedom of education and creation."²³ By taking Vietnam's case to the U.S. authorities, HCM was hoping that America would force France to grant more freedom to her colonies. He based this assumption on his understanding of America's history as a former British colony, as well as Wilson's advocacy for the idea of self-determination. Like many nationalists of his time, HCM interpreted self-determination as the people's right to determine their own statehood and form alliances with other entities at will.

Whether or not Wilson received the letter, it was unlikely that he would have supported HCM's cause in the first place. According to Brad Simpson, Wilson and his peers "did not believe it [i.e., self-determination] to be a right or [...] [thought] that the principle should apply to colonial peoples outside of Europe, at least not for the immediate future."²⁴ Simpson posits that many of world leaders at the time believed that self-determination only applied to independent countries. Meanwhile, anti-colonialists claimed that every country had a right to self-determination. The fact that his passionate letter remained unanswered pushed HCM toward communism, which was only just beginning to attract his attention. The lack of support from America, a liberal democracy, would have made communism with its goal of eradicating imperialism all the more attractive.

Another significant political movement in HCM's life was the end of World War II. In 1940, after France had surrendered to Nazi Germany, Japan had occupied Vietnam with the new Vichy government's consent. Japan's occupation of Vietnam lasted until August 1945 when Japan withdrew from Vietnam due to its impending defeat at the hands of the United States. As there were now no more French or Japanese forces occupying Vietnam, HCM and the Vietnamese people rushed to declare the country's independence. On September 2, 1945, Japan

²³ "Letter from Nguyen ai Quac [Ho Chi Minh] to Secretary of State Robert Lansing," June 18, 1919.

²⁴ Brad Simpson, "The Many Meanings of National Self-Determination," *Current History* 113, no. 766 (2014): 312-317.

officially surrendered to the United States. That same day, HCM delivered a speech declaring Vietnam's Independence. In this speech, he stated,

"All men are created equal. Their Creator endows them 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 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.²⁵

This speech suggests that HCM still believed that democratic ideals and self-determination would be the best path for Vietnam to thrive as a country. By invoking both the American and French declarations, HCM hoped to convince France to relinquish its pursuit to regain control of its colony and that the United States would recognize Vietnam as an independent nation in the global community. However, much like in 1919 at Versailles, HCM's wishes were ignored. With financial and logistical backing from the United States, France eagerly pushed to regain control of its Indochinese colony. According to Marvin E. Gettleman, the United States supported France's Vietnam efforts due to the rising threat of communism after World War II and considered French control of Vietnam essential to counter the spread of communism.²⁶ Regardless of America's rationale for not supporting Vietnam's Declaration of Independence, HCM would no longer rely on the United States' goodwill to help free his home country from foreign oppression. When French troops invaded Vietnam shortly after HCM's Declaration of Independence, HCM led his people against the French forces and sought military, financial, and logistical support via communist channels, thus permanently establishing himself as a communist leader.

Perhaps even more significant than HCM's post-World-War-II Declaration of Independence was an event that transpired after France's humiliation at the 1954 battle of Dien Bien Phu. After this decisive victory by Vietnamese forces, representatives from Vietnam, France, the United Kingdom, Cambodia, the Soviet Union, and the United States convened in Geneva, Switzerland, from April 26 until July 20, 1954, resulting in the establishment of the Geneva Accords. During these four months, Vietnam pleaded for the country's independence from foreign influence. However, the United States and the other parties involved decided to split the country in half at the 17th parallel, with the United States supporting South Vietnam and the Soviet Union and China supporting North Vietnam, similar to how Korea (1945) and Germany (1949) had been divided earlier in the Cold War.

Even though the Geneva Accords put an end to the fighting in Vietnam for the time being, HCM did not approve of several aspects of these agreements. For

²⁵ Ho Chi Minh, "Declaration of Independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam," September 2, 1945, *History Matters* (George Mason University), [online](#), accessed June 14, 2022.

²⁶ Marvin E. Gettleman, *Vietnam and America: A Documented History* (New York: Grove Press, 1985).

example, he and his southern counterpart Ngo Dinh Diem did not support the idea of a national election, nor did he appreciate the amount of funding that South Vietnam was receiving from the United States.²⁷ Despite these objections, HCM ultimately consented to the Geneva Accords, knowing full well that if he did not, the United States would simply attempt to finish what the French had started. By 1954, the U.S. position on communism was focused on containment (i.e., preventing the spread of communism by any means necessary). As they had demonstrated during their involvement in the Korean War, America was willing to commit to full-on war in order to protect its foreign interests and allies. The Geneva Accords caused HCM to build stronger relationships with his communist allies, especially the Soviet Union and Vietnam's long-time enemy China, in order to stay economically competitive with South Vietnam. As Thomas K. Latimer has shown in his dissertation, most of North Vietnam's political, economic, and cultural policies were geared toward reunification with South Vietnam.²⁸ It was not until 1963, after South Vietnam's Ngo Dinh Diem had been assassinated, that North Vietnam began to use armed force to retake South Vietnam. As HCM and the North Vietnamese government were working to undermine the Geneva Accords while simultaneously securing aid from their communist allies, they steered toward war with the United States.

III. Influential Literature

The literature HCM was reading throughout his life played a significant role in his ideological development and informed his own writings. It was in France that he first explored socialist and communist literature. Oddly enough, while he was reading the works of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Vladimir Lenin, he was also moved by literature on the history of the United States. He found America's struggle for freedom inspiring and appears to have been a believer in the American style of democracy. He took a great interest in President Wilson's administration and was greatly encouraged by Wilson's "Fourteen Points" (1918). In this speech to the U.S. Congress, Wilson had laid out his plan for how the global community should interact after the Great War. Among the propositions that HCM would take to heart was Wilson's fifth point, which stated that there should be a "free, open-minded, and impartial adjustment of all colonial claims." Wilson also made a case for the removal of economic trade barriers and advocated for more open diplomatic relations between countries in the first, second, and third points of his speech.²⁹

²⁷ Brocheux, *Ho Chi Minh*, 165.

²⁸ Thomas Kennedy Latimer, "Hanoi's Leaders and Their South Vietnam Policies: 1954-1968" (Ph.D. diss., Georgetown University, 1972), 8.

²⁹ Woodrow Wilson, "President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points," January 8, 1918, National Archives, Record Group 46 (Records of the U.S. Senate, 1789-2015), Messages, Reports, and Communications Tabled or Read, 1875-1968, [online](#), accessed June 14, 2022.

Wilson's "Fourteen Points" and his position on self-determination envisioned a new world order in which nations would be engaged in much more open and peaceful relations with one another, assuming the entire global community would share in these sentiments. As a young man, HCM would have been very much in favor of Wilson's ideas for a new world order. Yet, HCM, like many aspiring political leaders, would ultimately feel misled by America's message and actions on the world stage. Erez Manela has perfectly captured this in his monograph, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism*. Manela's work shows how nationalists in Egypt, India, China, and Korea—much like HCM—were inspired by Wilson's position on self-determination. However, when they requested backing from the American President for their mission to let their people choose how they govern themselves, they—much like HCM—received no support and no response. For example, Manela references Sa'd Zaghlul, an Egyptian politician who pleaded with the United States for help to end "British dominance" in the region, suggesting that the absence of support from the United States caused Egyptian nationalists, "to draw upon Wilsonian language in defining and defending their aim."³⁰ Thus, even after the United States had ignored these nationalists' pleas for help, they still held Wilson's beliefs in high esteem. While Manela does not address the situation in Vietnam or HCM in particular, his work points to similarities with China, Korea, and Vietnam: all three of these Asian countries eventually succumbed to rulers like HCM who had found solace in the ideology of communism.

As time went on, HCM started writing his own pieces, including political articles, books, and newspaper commentaries. In 1922, he founded *Le Paria*, a French magazine that allowed him to publish his thoughts on political topics and issues that furthered his agenda for Vietnam's independence. At that time, most French citizens were not even aware of the existence of Vietnam within the colony of Indochina. According to Joel Kindrick, HCM wrote about an incident involving a group of French soldiers in Indochina and a family living in a poor village. He claimed that the soldiers "beat one of the old men to death [...] roasted the other old man over a fire of twigs. Meanwhile, the rest of the group, having raped the two women, followed [...] the little girl and murdered her."³¹ HCM explained that this incident had occurred over a disagreement of payment for the soldiers and that the soldiers had become enraged because the villagers could not understand what they were saying. After the publication of this article, the French vowed to treat their colonial subjects better, but they would not give up their control of Indochina. However, by then, the damage to France's reputation had already been done, and people were beginning to talk about Vietnam and how France had treated it as a colony. This was just the start of HCM's activities as a political writer.

³⁰ Manela, *Wilsonian Moment*, 71, 157.

³¹ Kindrick, "Behind the Mind of Ho Chi Minh."

Eventually, HCM took what he had learned from reading the works of others, combined it with what he had learned writing news articles, and wrote his own books. His 1924 work, *The Case against French Colonialism*, for example, illustrates how the people of Vietnam had been aggrieved by France's colonial rule. In this book, HCM details the living conditions of the Vietnamese people in the early 1920s. His main argument against colonialism is that the colonized people are prevented from advancing as a country and as a people. The idea is most prominent when he compares the conditions the French colonizers live in with those of the country's native population. HCM accomplishes his task by telling the stories of those directly affected by the French government's actions. For instance, he recounts the story of a drafted soldier, referred to as Dahomey, whose village and property the French authorities had destroyed, and quotes directly from Dahomey's account:

During the looting and burning, all I had was taken from me. Nevertheless, I was enlisted by force, and despite this heinous attack of which I was the victim, I have done my duty at the French front. Now that the war is over, I will return to my country, homeless and without resources.³²

This passage showcases HCM's ability to combine controversial topics with powerful emotions in order to further his agenda. HCM continued to address the inhumane conditions his people were forced to endure by any means available to him, namely, through speeches, writings, and letters to world leaders on all sides of the political spectrum. He did this to bring these issues into plain view, hoping that Vietnam's imperial rulers would eventually grant his country the freedom it deserved.

Since HCM was an avid supporter of Lenin's style of communism, it comes as no surprise that a large portion of his library comprised the works of Lenin, who had been the first socialist leader to overthrow an oppressive imperial government and had established a communist regime that all other communists leaders would model theirs after. Lenin's draft theses on "National and Colonial Questions" had been submitted to the Second Congress of the Communist International in 1920. In these theses, Lenin describes colonization's pitfalls and how it affects the people subjected to colonialism. HCM would have been inspired by Lenin's comments on the plight of the colonized people; specifically, Lenin had argued that "[t]he age-old oppression of colonial and weak nationalities by the imperialist powers has not only filled the working masses of the oppressed countries with animosity toward the oppressor nations but has also aroused distrust in these nations in general."³³ It is likely that HCM would have interpreted

³² Ho Chi Minh, *The Case Against French Colonization*, trans. Joshua Leinsdorf (Atlantic Highlands: Pentland Press, 2017), 156.

³³ Vladimir I. Lenin, "Draft Theses on National and Colonial Questions for the Second Congress of the Communist International," June 5, 1920, trans. Julius Katzer, in Vladimir I. Lenin,

Lenin's statement as a reassurance that the oppression of colonial powers would one day end at the hands of the oppressed as they would overthrow the colonial powers. According to Brett Reilly, HCM declared that "only Lenin's theses and the communist system will establish a universal republic among all countries,"³⁴ thus revealing HCM's fascination with socialist writings.

By 1920, HCM's writings were beginning to reflect his own political beliefs. His articles appeared in *L'Humanité*, a French daily newspaper in which many members of the FCP were posting their political articles denouncing capitalism and promoting both socialism and communism.³⁵ HCM, too, wrote articles about "denouncing the 'hydra' of capitalism and colonialism," while some of his other articles centered around "calling on the international proletariat to lead a world revolution." However, not all of HCM's articles were published, as some were deemed too extreme. HCM also had the opportunity to write articles for the Soviet communist newspaper *Pravda*, where other high-profile communist leaders like Joseph Stalin regularly published their articles. After the death of Vladimir Lenin in 1924, HCM wrote a particular piece in which he noted that Lenin had wanted to help liberate other peoples as well and that he had called upon the White peoples to help the Yellow and Black peoples to free themselves from the foreign aggressors' yoke.³⁶ HCM later published about the importance of the colonial people during revolutionary movements, often referring to them as the backbone of any revolutionary movement. HCM was inspired by the works of others, and he, in turn, encouraged many more through his own writings, making him an even more prominent political figure in the world's socialist communities.

Conclusion

To understand why the people of Vietnam, to this day, hold Ho-Chi-Minh in such high regard, it is essential to understand the individuals, events, and writings that shaped his career and personality. While the United States were somewhat responsible for the path he ultimately took and, by ignoring his plight, may have driven him toward communism, he had not always been a supporter of the communist ideology. One can only speculate whether his political stance would have become dramatically different, had the United States offered more support for his cause. As this article has shown, HCM's socialist and communist-leaning beliefs started at a young age. They were already evident during his time in France where he was heavily involved in socialist organizations, such as the FCP, and openly praised communist figures like Vladimir Lenin, whom he admired greatly. His radical political ideology and admiration for communist philosophies can also be gleaned from his writings, as well as the pieces of literature he referenced. He

Collected Works, 2nd English ed. (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), 31:144-151, [online](#), accessed June 14, 2022.

³⁴ Reilly, "Myth of the Wilsonian Moment."

³⁵ See Reilly, "Myth of the Wilsonian Moment," for the subsequent quotes.

³⁶ Kindrick, "Behind the Mind of Ho Chi Minh."

was an avid reader who appears to have digested more of Karl Marx's and Vladimir Lenin's works than those of Thomas Jefferson and Woodrow Wilson, so it is clear, from a literary standpoint, that he favored communism and socialism. Many of the individuals he met—or merely admired—during his rise to power offer strong clues as to where his political aspirations resided. Yet, they were not all cut from the same cloth, as his appreciation extended to the likes of Nguyễn An Ninh, Woodrow Wilson, and Vladimir Lenin. Thus, in one way or another, people, events, and literature shaped the iconic historical figure HCM would become in his own right.

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