

He Once Saved U.S. Airmen, Now They Bomb His Nation

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SAIGON.

Twenty years ago this month, as the war against Japan was in its final phase, an efficient but straggly band of guerrillas wandered through the forests of Indochina, searching for downed American fliers.

"We walked 30 miles a day, up and down hills. That was a long way," recalls a Saigon business man who was one of the guerrillas.

"When we picked up the pilots, they weren't used to walking, and they wanted to ride our pack horses. The horses slowed us down—and we had to keep moving fast.

"I remember we picked up one American flier with a brain wound. We took him all the way into China. . . ."

The leader of the guerrilla band was Ho Chi Minh, now President of Communist North Viet Nam. Today, American fliers are bombing his country.

This is one of the many ironies of politics witnessed by Mr. Ho in more than 45 years as a Communist. Other ironies:

He was first a member of the Communist party in France—but 30 years later he led the resistance war against the French in Viet Nam.

As a recruit of the Soviet Communist party he helped train Chinese troops for Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, then favored by the Russians over the Chinese Communists. Now Mr. Ho's regime is a bitter foe of Gen. Chiang and leans toward the Red Chinese ideology rather than Russia's.

Ho Chi Minh is both man and myth in Viet Nam. Long ago fact became mixed with fiction. But it is certain that he was a Bolshevik before a Russian party worker named Josef Stalin had been heard of and a card-carrying Communist when Mao Tse-tung was only a provincial Chinese resistance leader.

ANCESTORS

Mr. Ho was born about 1890 in Nghe An Province, north of the 17th Parallel. The provincial capital is Vinh, which was bombed during the Tonkin Gulf crisis in August and raided frequently in the air strikes by U. S. planes that started in February.

His real name probably was Nguyen Chi Thanh (The Most Sincere), but no one knows for certain. He first wrote under the name of Nguyen Ai Quoc (Nguyen the Patriot) and later used the alias of Ho

Chi Minh, which means "The Most Enlightened One."

His father was a Chinese-educated scholar whose ancestors had been mandarins serving the imperial administrative system. Mr. Ho's father, perhaps because he opposed the French colonial rulers, refused to become a mandarin. A virtually penniless teacher, he traveled south to Saigon, leaving his children behind.

When Ho Chi Minh was a teenager, he went to Saigon to see his father, who reportedly told him he was old enough to take care of himself. Like his father, Ho Chi Minh became a drifter. Nevertheless, the Communists still call Saigon "The City of Ho Chi Minh."

"When we were walking through the jungles, we'd ask Ho Chi Minh about his family," the Saigon business man said. "But he never talked about them. He talked only about the country."

One report is that after Mr. Ho became President of Viet Nam in 1945, his sister came to the Presidential Palace to see him. He sent her home after a half-hour of chit-chat.

"Even as President, Ho Chi Minh was a very simple man, very kind and gentle," the business man said. "But his generals were cruel and ruthless."

STOWAWAY

After leaving his father in Saigon, Ho Chi Minh stowed away on a ship to France. He became a sailor and traveled to England, Europe—and even to Boston, some say. He later was a kitchen-hand in famous restaurants in France and England, specializing in pastry-making.

In 1919, he attended the Communist Third International as a delegate of the French Communist party. Later he was sent to Moscow for more training and to other conferences throughout Europe.

In 1925 he was sent as a member of a Russian delegation (he was given Russian citizenship and a Russian name) to Canton, China, to advise the Whampoo military academy training troops for Chiang Kai-shek.

During this period, Chiang was in a brief "honeymoon" alliance with the Chinese Communist party in their common fight against the Chinese warlords. But the honeymoon was shattered in 1927; the Communists, including Mao Tse-tung, fled to plan their fight against both the warlords and Chiang Kai-shek.

It was during this period that Mr. Ho witnessed the

Russians assisting the Nationalist Chinese rather than the Communists—which caused the initial split between the Russian and Chinese parties.

After the Russian delegation went back to Moscow, Mr. Ho disappeared. But he soon turned up in northeast Thailand and Laos, where he established a Communist party apparatus. In the late 1920s he became chief of the Asian Bureau for the Moscow party. His responsibilities extended from Japan to India, Indonesia to Indochina.

On Jan. 6, 1930, Mr. Ho founded the IndoChina Communist party; as economic depression and anti-French sentiment spread in Viet Nam Mr. Ho established recruiting and training centers for his cadre.

PRESIDENT

During the '30s Mr. Ho virtually faded from the picture, but the legends about him spread throughout Viet Nam. For a time he was in a British jail in Hong Kong; later he wandered back and forth across the Vietnamese-Chinese border.

When the war against Japan began, he established war zones for his guerrilla bands. Americans parachuted supplies in to the guerrillas during the final days of the war in return for anti-Japanese intelligence information and the rescue of U. S. fliers.

As World War II ended in the Pacific, Mr. Ho's Viet Minh troops seized control from the Japanese and on Sept. 2 he was named President, the post he has fought to retain ever since.

In 1946, the French troops returned to Viet Nam to reclaim their colony. The Viet Minh immediately began the anti-colonial war, which they won eight years later.

Now, in North Viet Nam's war against "American aggressors," Mr. Ho at 75 years of age apparently has left most of the decision-making to the younger party militants.

"Ho Chi Minh receives guests in the old French Governor-General's Palace," one traveler from Hanoi reported.

"But we don't know where he lives. He still wears his old battered tunic, with an old pair of sandals and no socks. He comes along and lights a cigar at a cocktail party and is very gallant, offering chocolates to the ladies, making a few jokes in fluent English—and then he goes off."

The Saigon businessman who helped Mr. Ho search for American pilots 20 years ago says that "Uncle Ho still commands respect, but in decision-making he has a tiny voice that is very far away."