

[print page](#)[close window](#)

## Union of French Indochina

Created in 1893, the Union of French Indochina comprised Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. The Union was one of France's most profitable colonies and remained intact until the Vichy government was forced to hand over all economic resources to invading Japanese forces. Day-to-day administration of the colony, however, remained in the hands of the French.

The origins of French influence in the region date back to the mid-19th century, when French emperor Napoleon III sent a naval expedition into the Mekong Delta to respond to the persecution of French Catholic missionaries by Vietnamese authorities. Subsequent offensives by the French Navy forced Vietnamese emperor Tu Duc to concede the region of Cochinchina, an area in the southern region of present-day Vietnam. Further excursions in the decades to follow resulted in the surrender of the remaining regions of Tonkin and Annam by the Vietnamese court. Shortly thereafter, Laos and Cambodia were made French protectorates and later incorporated into the union.

During French rule, sporadic attempts at resistance occurred, but Vietnamese authorities often advocated cooperation with the French. In 1930, however, a pro-independence activist named Ho Chi Minh founded the League for the Independence of Vietnam, also known as the Viet Minh. The party called for the overthrow of French rule and the total independence of Vietnam and worked underground during the 1930s and 1940s in order to achieve its goal.

After the Japanese surrender in August 1945, the Viet Minh took overt action to secure an independent Vietnam. Ho declared the country's independence on September 2. France refused to grant independence, however, and the Indochina War broke out in December 1946 when Viet Minh troops attacked French forces in Hanoi. As the conflict evolved into a bloody stalemate, France sought negotiations to end the war. On the eve of United Nations-sponsored talks in Geneva, the Viet Minh overran French forces at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu.

In accordance with the subsequent Geneva Conference of 1954, France withdrew from Vietnam, and the country was divided into two parts. Originally intended to be temporary, this partition remained until the eventual reunification of the country in 1976 after the Vietnam War.

ID: 312206

[back to top](#)

---

### FURTHER READING

Aldrich, Robert, *Greater France: A History of French Overseas Expansion*, 1996; Young, Marilyn B., *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990*, 1991.

---

### CITATION: MLA STYLE

"Union of French Indochina." *World History: The Modern Era*. 2009. ABC-CLIO. 22 Apr. 2009 <<http://www.worldhistory.abc-clio.com>>.

[View All Citation Styles](#)

[print page](#)[close window](#)

## Ho Chi Minh

Despite his seemingly frail appearance, Ho Chi Minh possessed an iron will and was singularly determined to liberate his country from foreign colonial powers. He never lived to see the final victory, but his three decades of uncompromising leadership placed Vietnam on the path to national unity under a communist government.

Ho was born Nguyen Sinh Cung in Nghe An Province on May 19, 1890. He was the son of Nguyen Sinh Sac, a mandarin and itinerant teacher. Indochina was then under French colonial supervision and suffering from the effects of that outside domination. Like his father, Ho came to resent colonialism and dedicated his life to ending it in Vietnam. Ho received his formal education in Hue at the Quoc Hoc school. After graduation, he taught school in a number of southern Vietnamese towns, including Saigon.

In 1911, Ho, now called Van Ba, hired on to a French ship as a kitchen helper and traveled to the United States, Africa, and then Europe. While in the United States, he supposedly was interested in the U.S. concepts of political rights outlined in the U.S. Declaration of Independence (1776) and the U.S. Constitution. During his years abroad, Ho held a variety of jobs, working as a gardener, waiter, and snow sweeper before settling on more permanent work as a photography assistant. In 1913, he sailed to London and worked as a dishwasher and assistant pastry chef at the Carlton Hotel.

When World War I commenced in 1914, Ho ventured to Paris under the assumed name of Nguyen Ai Quoc (Nguyen the Patriot) to join the French Socialist Party. In 1919, he petitioned the Paris Peace Conference to allow political freedom in his native land, but his request was ignored. Undeterred, he broke with the socialists to help found the French Communist Party in 1920 and embarked on a lengthy quest to eliminate French colonialism. In 1923, Ho ventured to Moscow, where he trained as a Comintern agent. The following year, he was dispatched by the Comintern to China for the purpose of organizing Vietnamese dissidents into communist revolutionaries. When the Chinese Kuomintang (Nationalist Party) under Chiang Kai-shek broke with Moscow in 1926, however, Ho and many followers were either expelled or arrested. He went back to Moscow, where he spent several more years before returning to southern China in 1941 at the height of World War II.

The war had brought chaos to Southeast Asia as Japanese troops invaded and expelled the French troops from their colonial empire. Ho regarded Japanese colonialism with the same antipathy that he felt toward the French and offered his assistance to the Kuomintang who were fighting the Japanese. The Kuomintang arrested him again, however. Shortly after his release in 1942, he adopted the name Ho Chi Minh ("He Who Enlightens") before returning to Vietnam.

In Vietnam, Ho helped to organize communist sympathizers into an effective guerrilla movement, the Viet Minh, which fought the Japanese. He was helped politically and militarily by the U.S. Office of Strategic Services, which viewed him as a potentially useful ally (as it did all communists who were resisting the Axis powers). Though merciless toward his political rivals, Ho was careful to couch his politics in nationalistic, anticolonial idealism to bring a broad spectrum of dissidents together.

Following the Japanese surrender of 1945, a power vacuum was left by the absence of any imperial power in Vietnam, and only the Viet Minh were sufficiently organized to take charge. On September 2, 1945, Ho declared the creation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam with himself as president.

Unmoved by the rhetoric of self-determination that the Allies had adopted during World War II, the French were determined to revive their Asian empire and returned in force the following year. Ho offered to share power with the French in some kind of commonwealth agreement, but when negotiations failed, open warfare broke out. Ho had correctly gauged the temperament of his adversaries and deduced they would be unwilling or unable to endure a protracted conflict. After eight years of fighting, the Viet Minh decisively defeated the French garrison at Dien Bien Phu, and the French withdrew from Indochina.

Subsequent negotiations at Geneva, Switzerland, in 1954 acknowledged Ho's complete control of the northern half of Vietnam but also recognized the regime of the noncommunist government in the southern half. Reunification of the country was to take place via a national election. Ho was easily the most popular man throughout the country and would have easily won the contest, which is why the Ngo Dinh Diem regime in South Vietnam, backed by the U.S. government, never allowed it to occur.

Ho continued consolidating his power in the North until 1960, when he initiated a concerted guerrilla strategy to give support to the communists in South Vietnam and topple its increasingly unpopular government. In many respects, it was less a war than a terrorist campaign directed against political adversaries. When the U.S. government, unsettled by what it viewed as a communist conquest directed from Moscow against its client state, intervened directly with ground troops in 1961, prospects for the North Vietnamese seemed dim. Like the French, however, U.S. forces underestimated the determination and resilience of the forces commanded by Ho.

For his part, Ho may have underestimated the millions of deaths and ecological destruction that U.S. technology would inflict upon his country before the Americans admitted that they could not win and began to withdraw from the conflict in 1973. He was successful in convincing his countrymen that the very presence of U.S. forces constituted a new imperialist force that must be defeated. Ho was also skilled at the delicate balancing of politics with the Soviet Union and China, bitter ideological rivals that both provided material and military assistance. Ho did not survive to see the fruits of his labors; he died of a heart ailment on September 2, 1969. When the southern capital of Saigon fell to a final communist onslaught in 1975, it was renamed Ho Chi Minh City in his honor.

ID: 317432

[back to top](#)

---

#### FURTHER READING

Duiker, William J. *Sacred War: Nationalism and Revolution in a Divided Vietnam*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995; Fenn, Charles. *Ho Chi Minh: A Biographical Introduction*. New York: Scribner, 1973; Halberstam, David. *Ho*. New York: Random House, 1971; HỒ Chi Minh. *On Revolution: Selected Writings, 1920-66*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1984; Karnow, Stanley. *Vietnam: A History*. New York: Viking, 1984; Lacouture, Jean. *Ho Chi Minh: A Political Biography*. Trans. Peter Wiles. New York: Vintage Books, 1968; Lloyd, Dana Ohlmeyer. *Ho Chi Minh*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986; Marr, David G. *Vietnam 1945: The Quest for Power*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995; Sainteny, Jean. *Ho Chi Minh and His Vietnam; a Personal Memoir*. Trans. Herma Briffault. Chicago: Cowles, 1972; Tai, Hue-Tam Ho. *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992.

---

#### CITATION: MLA STYLE

"Ho Chi Minh." *World History: The Modern Era*. 2009. ABC-CLIO. 22 Apr. 2009 <<http://www.worldhistory.abc-clio.com>>.

[View All Citation Styles](#)