CHAPTER 1

Heritage

FROM ALL DIRECTIONS, FROM HANOI AND FROM THE SURROUNDING countryside, several hundred thousand Vietnamese converged on a large square called the Place Puginier, next to the French Governor's palace. At that square, they had been told, they could hear the man who had suddenly claimed to be the leader of all Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh arrived at the Place Puginier in a black American automobile. He was supposed to speak to the throng at 2:00 P.M., but he arrived several minutes late because the streets of Hanoi were jammed with pedestrians heading toward the square. Having no dress clothes of his own, Ho was wearing a faded khaki suit and a high-collared jacket that he had borrowed from an acquaintance, and atop his head was a pith helmet. Men in suits waved small red flags with gold stars and a band played marches as he headed towards a high wooden platform in the center of the square. Just a few weeks earlier, the Viet Minh had taken over the city from a Japanese occupation force, which had largely stopped functioning after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but Viet Minh leaders still feared that the Japanese might interfere with this momentous event. For that reason, armed Viet Minh guards hovered around the platform and the rest of the square. At Ho's invitation, several American officers from the Office of Strategic Services were standing near the platform, and two American P-38 Lightning fighters happened to fly over the assemblage during the event, both of which created a false impression that the United States government was endorsing Ho Chi Minh.

Ho tailored the beginning of his speech to the American officers standing right in front of him. Quoting from the American Declaration of Independence, Ho pronounced, "All men are created equal. They are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights; among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." He then read from a proclamation that had inspired a more radical set of men, the French Revolution's Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen: "All men are born free and with equal rights, and must always remain free and have equal rights." Ho proceeded to accuse the French colonialists of violating these American and French principles in all sorts of cruel

ways. Asserting that his new government represented "the entire Vietnamese people," he made no mention of his political ideology, and the only political objective he discussed was the formation of an independent Vietnam. "The entire Vietnamese people," he said in conclusion, "are determined to mobilize all their physical and mental strength, to sacrifice their lives and property, in order to safeguard their freedom and independence."[1]

According to many accounts, the Place Puginier speech on September 2, 1945 proved that nationalism, not Marxist-Leninist internationalism, was the locomotive that pulled Ho Chi Minh's revolution. Ho Chi Minh, it is argued, was simply the latest in a long line of Vietnamese nationalists who had resisted foreign aggressors. Had it not been for American determination to support the French colonialists and later to prop up a weak non-Communist South Vietnam, the United States and a unified Vietnam under Ho Chi Minh could have been allies, with Ho's Vietnam turning against Communist China because of nationalist animosity just as Yugoslavia had turned against the Soviet Union. If only the Americans had understood the history of Vietnam, the whole tragedy could have been averted.[2]

The fatal flaw in this line of reasoning is that the history of Vietnam and the history of Ho Chi Minh actually support the very opposite conclusions.[3] Ho Chi Minh was not, in reality, the most recent of many nationalist heroes who had combated foreign aggression. Driving out foreign invaders was not the main chord of Vietnam's national song; infighting was the primary chord, and aggression against the southern neighbors of Champa and Cambodia rivaled the struggle against foreign invasion for second place. For most of the thousand years that are known in the West as the first millennium A.D., Vietnam belonged to what later became China. On a dozen occasions during that period, the residents of Vietnam attempted to expel the ruling officials and soldiers by force of arms, not out of xenophobia – many of the rebels had been born in China or descended from Chinese ancestors – but out of a desire for power or freedom from the central authority. In every case except the last one, the only rebel successes were but brief flourishes that quickly perished along with the perpetrators. The final revolt began in 939, under the leadership of Ngo Quyen, and it ended with Vietnam receiving vassal status from its massive northern neighbor, which entailed the payment of tributes to China in return for Vietnam's autonomy. Vietnam would remain a vassal of China for nearly one thousand years.

From this point onward, in all of the centuries to come, the very extensive fighting within Vietnam consisted almost entirely of one Vietnamese faction fighting another Vietnamese faction. Vanity and cruelty often prevailed in these contests, giving lie to the view of some in the West that it was French colonialism that corrupted Vietnamese politics. The infighting began just five years after Vietnam obtained vassal status from China. Upon Ngo Quyen's death in 944, his brother-in-law Duong Tam Kha and his son Xuong Van went to war over

the throne, leading to a succession of usurpations. In 963, while observing his military forces from a boat, King Xuong Van was felled by a crossbowman hidden on the bank. His death plunged Vietnam into a two-year period era of anarchy known as the Period of the Twelve Warlords. Unity returned to the land in 965 when the warlord Dinh Bo Linh put down the other lords. But bloody rebellions would plague his dynasty and all that followed it, becoming more frequent when the king was incompetent or inattentive to subversion. Knowing that deception and treachery were constantly fermenting in the hearts of their countrymen, the kings usually delegated power to their family members, and for this reason revolts normally failed unless they involved members of the royal family audacious enough to despoil the sanctity of kinship. On occasion, however, the entire dynasty was supplanted by feudal lords, in which case there was certain to be considerable brutality, possibly involving wholesale slaughter of the outgoing dynasty.

To support the view that Ho Chi Minh could have become an Asian Tito, numerous commentators have asserted that China and Vietnam had been at war for much of Vietnam's existence and enemies for nearly all of it prior to the mid-twentieth century, ensuring subsequent conflict.[4] The actual history of Vietnam, however, does not bear out this claim. From the end of the tenth century to the middle of the twentieth century, the Chinese and the Vietnamese fought a mere three wars, all of which the Vietnamese initiated. The first of these wars, in 1075, began when the Vietnamese raided China to prevent the Chinese from dominating the buffer zone between Vietnam and China. The Song Chinese sent an army into Vietnam to punish the Vietnamese, and the army withdrew once the Vietnamese apologized for what they had done. In the two subsequent wars, in 1406 and 1789, the Chinese came to Vietnam because one Vietnamese faction invited them in to help fight another Vietnamese faction. The very few uninvited attacks on Vietnam during this thousand-year period were made not by China but by Champa, by the Mongol empire of Kublai Khan, and by France.[5]

In general, amicability characterized relations between China and Vietnam during these thousand years. Having been a Chinese province and a popular destination for Chinese emigrants during the preceding thousand years, Vietnam had thoroughly absorbed the customs, ideas, and religions of China. From the time of its independence through the middle of the twentieth century, Vietnam remained a follower of China in the realms of culture and politics. Although the Vietnamese at times resented Chinese influence and feared excessive Chinese meddling in Vietnam's affairs, as is typical when one nation dominates another, these emotions were not strong enough to either prevent collaboration or create serious hostility. From the middle of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century, the Vietnamese and Chinese helped each other repeatedly in times of need, much as the Americans during the same period worked together with the British, who had been their colonial masters

much more recently. Cooperation was especially close among Vietnamese and Chinese of Communist persuasion.

Ho Chi Minh was one in a long line of Vietnamese leaders who used assistance from abroad to fight their Vietnamese enemies. For most of his career, his successes depended heavily upon large-scale material aid and advice from the Soviet Union and China. His struggles against French colonialism constituted a civil war as well as a war against a foreign power, for more Vietnamese than Frenchmen would take up arms against the Viet Minh, and when Ho's nationalist rival Ngo Dinh Diem came to power in southern Vietnam, the ensuing conflict was purely a contest between two Vietnamese groups that relied heavily on foreign assistance. If one side in that conflict could be said to be less dependent on foreigners than the other, it was not the Communists, as Ho was much more deferential to his foreign advisers than was Ngo Dinh Diem. Ho was to follow the advice of the Chinese with a submissiveness that Diem would never display in his dealings with the Americans. Only Ho Chi Minh would fill towns and villages with propaganda lauding his foreign allies.

Foreign aid to warring Vietnamese factions figured prominently in Vietnamese history from the fourteenth century onward. In 1369, the Vietnamese king perished without leaving an heir, leading to a succession crisis during which royals slaughtered one another in great numbers. Among the victims was Nhat Le, the first man to seize the throne. After Nhat Le's murder, his mother went to the country of Champa to ask for help against the Vietnamese who had taken the kingdom from her son, and, in 1371, the Chams complied. Led by the famed Che Bong Nga, the Chams entered the Red River Valley, tore the Vietnamese army to shreds, and burned the palaces of Hanoi. In 1389, the Chams returned to Vietnam to assist Vietnamese rebels, but just as they were about to defeat the forces of the Vietnamese king, a Cham traitor revealed the location of Che Bong Nga's ship, thereby enabling the Vietnamese to kill the Cham hero and take his head. The Chams, deflated by the death of their mighty leader, returned to their homeland.

In the year 1400, the cunning regent Ho Quy Ly orchestrated the strangling of the young king and massacred huge numbers of his supporters and their male relatives, from babies to old men, in order to take over the throne. Surviving members of the dynastic family appealed to the Chinese for help, and finally, in 1406, Chinese Emperor Yung Lo agreed to do so. He dispatched an army known as the "Force the Barbarians to Submit Army," which, abetted by the ousted dynasty, defeated Ho Quy Ly's forces and drove him from power. Possessed by an enormous appetite for enlarging his domain, Yung Lo did not restore the Vietnamese royal family to power but instead chose to place Vietnam under the rule of his own Ming dynasty. The Ming government in Vietnam, Chinese though it was, enjoyed widespread favor among the people of northern Vietnam. Further south, however, a wealthy Vietnamese landowner named Le Loi formed a powerful group of rebels. A fierce war followed between the Ming

and Le Loi's forces, lasting nearly a decade. It ended when Yung Lo's successor decided that Vietnam was not worth the trouble and agreed to let Le Loi have all of Vietnam, returning it to vassal status.

With the start of the early sixteenth century came some of the worst infighting in Vietnamese history, leading to the establishment of two rival regimes, one in the north and one in the south. North Vietnam and South Vietnam were to engage intermittently in inconclusive wars for the next two hundred years. The Nguyen family, which took control of southern Vietnam in the latter part of the sixteenth century, erected two huge walls north of the plains of Quang Tri, running from the sea all the way to the Annamite foothills. Located near the seventeenth parallel, the walls sat very close to the line that would divide North Vietnam from South Vietnam following the Geneva Conference of 1954. After an interval of peace, the North – now led by the Trinh family – attacked the South, beginning a series of wars spanning half a century. Once again Vietnamese leaders sought foreign assistance in order to fight their Vietnamese rivals, with the Nguyen family receiving military equipment and advice from the Portuguese, and the Trinh family obtaining assistance from the Dutch, who were competing with the Portuguese in the scramble for colonies and trading privileges in the Far East. Although the North had a far larger population and army than the South, and although the South expended much of its martial energy in the conquest of lands belonging to Cambodia and Champa, the Trinh were never able to vanquish the Southerners.

In the late eighteenth century, three brothers from the village of Tay Son overthrew both the northern and southern monarchies in an orgy of violence that included ritual cannibalism and every other form of barbarity. The Tay Son brothers cut Vietnam into three sections, North, Center, and South, and ran them as separate states. The deposed royal families called on the Chinese for help in removing the Tay Son brothers, prompting the Chinese emperor to send his troops into Vietnam, the first time Chinese troops had been deployed to Vietnam since 1406. With the assistance of the Chinese, the old dynasties and their supporters drove the Tay Son from the cities and slaughtered many of their collaborators. But the youngest and greatest of the Tay Son brothers, Emperor Quang Trung, built a large army and, in 1789, threw the Chinese back into China while smashing the former dynasties.

Soon thereafter, the former southern king's nephew, Nguyen Anh, stormed into southern Vietnam and seized the commercial center of Saigon and much else in southern Vietnam from the Tay Son. Pigneau de Behaine, a French missionary, persuaded French merchants, missionaries, and naval officers to send Nguyen Anh two ships, a collection of military hardware, and European military advisers so that he could take northern Vietnam as well. From bases in southern Vietnam, Nguyen Anh's forces marched northward into a war that was to last thirteen years. Many of Nguyen Anh's European military advisers grew tired of him during the war and quit. He was overly cautious, they complained,

and had no sense of urgency. But in 1802, Nguyen Anh captured Hue and then Hanoi, putting an end to the rule of the Tay Son. He promptly executed the members of the Tay Son family and the families that had supplied the Tay Son with generals. The deposed Tay Son emperor, Nguyen Quang Toan, was forced to watch while Nguyen Anh's men urinated on his parents' disinterred bones, and then he had his limbs tied to four elephants that were driven in four directions until his body was torn into pieces.

Making Hue his capital, Nguyen Anh proclaimed himself the Emperor Gia Long and unified modern Vietnam, to include the Mekong Delta, for the first time. Although both Ho Chi Minh and Ngo Dinh Diem would later claim to be the rightful ruler of all of Vietnam, which they said was a single nation, Vietnam as a unified country had only a very brief and troubled history. Prior to 1954, North Vietnam and South Vietnam would be united for just fifty-eight years, from 1802 to 1859 – a very short period for an area with 2,700 years of history. This unification period would be filled with great tyranny, intrigue, and bloodletting among the Vietnamese, not the sort of unification to merit nostalgia. Nor was it the sort that would help the people develop a strong identification with Vietnam as a nation. For a much longer period, two hundred years in length, the North and South had been divided near the demarcation line established in 1954, and Northerners and Southerners had fought numerous wars against each other during those two centuries. Under the Tay Son and again under the French, Vietnam was divided into North, Center, and South, three regions that developed distinct cultures and identities along with feelings of superiority over the other two thirds. Much of unified Vietnam, moreover, had not been Vietnamese at all for most of Vietnam's history. Until the Vietnamese crushed the Chams in the fifteenth century, ninety percent of what became South Vietnam had belonged to either Champa or Cambodia. Vietnamese settlers did not penetrate the lands at the southern and western extremes of modern South Vietnam until the 1700s, and not until 1757 did the South Vietnamese kingdom reach the southernmost point of the Mekong Delta. While the regions of Vietnam shared the same language and were adjacent grographically, they were not predestined to become unified, any more than were the United States and Canada, or Germany and Austria. Because of its complicated history, Vietnam could legitimately be considered to be one, two, or three countries.

To complicate matters further, much of Vietnam was inhabited by people who were not considered to be Vietnamese by either themselves or by the ethnic Vietnamese who dominated the affairs of prosperous lowland Vietnam. After the annexation of the Mekong Delta, the ethnic Vietnamese were fond of saying that Vietnam was two rice baskets at the ends of a carrying pole, with the Mekong Delta in the south complementing the Red River Delta in the north. This assertion betrayed the contempt of the ethnic Vietnamese for the country's ethnic minorities, for the analogy was apt only if Vietnam were considered

to be merely the two deltas and the coastal lowland areas in between them, where virtually all of the ethnic Vietnamese lived. The lowland strip along the central coast was indeed narrow like a pole, but to its west the central highlands extended for hundreds of miles, making them comparable in breadth to the Mekong Delta. Comprising two-thirds of the land mass of southern Vietnam, the highlands were home to tribes from a wide range of ethnic groups. Most of them lived in humble villages on the vast Kontum and Darlac plateaus or in the steep mountains of the Annamite chain, a huge spur of the Himalayan massif running from China's southern frontier down the Southeast Asian peninsula.

By the time Gia Long had established dominion over all of the Vietnamese territories, Vietnam was on a collision course with France. Out of deference to his French benefactors, Gia Long allowed French and Spanish missionaries to convert many Vietnamese to Catholicism – by the 1820s, they had built the Catholic population of Vietnam to 300,000. But Gia Long's successors turned against the missionaries because of their ties to ravenous European governments and their support for opposition groups in a period of great civil strife. During the twenty-year reign of Gia Long's immediate successor, Minh Mang, no less than two hundred different uprisings against the emperor took place, with the opposition particularly strong in southern Vietnam, which remained very resistant to northern authority. At the end of a failed rebellion in 1833, the emperor's forces captured a French missionary with the rebels and, in public, they burned him with red hot pincers, hung him on a cross, and slowly sliced off his chest muscles, buttocks, and other body parts until he died. Emperor Thieu Tri, who came to power in 1840, killed several more missionaries, hundreds of Vietnamese Catholic priests, and thousands of their followers.

The persecution of missionaries and their converts, together with a desire to amass colonies at a time when European countries were racing to expand their empires, caused Emperor Napoleon III to send French forces to Vietnam at the end of 1857, beginning a twenty-five year conflict in which the next Vietnamese emperor, Tu Duc, attempted to fend off French attacks as well as several hundred internal revolts of various kinds. On August 25, 1883, Vietnam surrendered its independence to France. As the Tay Son had done, the French carved Vietnam into three parts – Tonkin in the north, Annam in the center, and Cochinchina in the south. The Chinese, at the urging of the Vietnamese, tried to contest France's colonization of Vietnam by sending their own soldiers to fight the French, but after two years of costly warfare the Chinese relented and agreed to peace on French terms. China officially relinquished its status as protector of Tonkin, bringing to an end the payment of tribute from Vietnam to China. In the next few years, some Vietnamese elites organized further resistance to their new rulers, but most of the prominent and talented Vietnamese decided to cooperate with the French, and a large number of them eagerly absorbed not only the science and technology that gave the French the tools of power but also

the ideas that animated them. To maintain their hold on Vietnam, the French colonialists would always rely more heavily on Vietnamese manpower than on their own.

Two strong anti-colonial groups that emerged during the 1920s attempted to throw the French out by force of arms in 1930. The Vietnam Nationalist Party, modeled after China's Kuomintang, incited a mutiny among Vietnamese soldiers in the colonial army, but the French quickly destroyed the mutineers and much of the party. The tattered remnants of the Vietnam Nationalist Party had to hobble into China. The second group was the Vietnamese Communist Party, led by the man who was to become known as Ho Chi Minh.[6] Born in 1890 in the province of Nghe An, Ho was the son of a well-to-do mandarin. During his teenage years, Ho attended the Lycée Quoc Hoc in Hue, the best high school available to Vietnamese boys, a school that would also educate the future Communist Party leaders Vo Nguyen Giap and Pham Van Dong, as well as the two anti-Communists who would ultimately cause Ho Chi Minh the greatest grief, Ngo Dinh Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu. Ho Chi Minh left Vietnam in 1912 to work aboard a French ocean liner, beginning a long period of life abroad. Following World War I, he settled in Paris and joined the French Socialist Party. Many years later, Ho would explain that he did not understand the party's ideology or platform at the time and he joined simply because they "had shown their sympathy toward me, toward the struggle of the oppressed peoples."[7] French leftists deemed Ho's oratorical skills and appearance unimpressive, but they liked his emotional intensity, which they said could be seen in his dark, flashing eyes.

The French Socialist party would be the stepping stone that took Ho to the Communism of Marx and Lenin. Coming from a country wrapped in authoritarian and communitarian traditions, Ho was not repelled by the lack of democracy and individualism in Soviet Communism, as many of the French Socialists were repelled. Ho later said that he went from being a Socialist to a Communist upon reading Lenin's "Theses on the National and Colonial Questions." He recounted,

> In those Theses, there were political terms that were difficult to understand. But by reading them again and again, finally I was able to grasp the essential part. What emotion, enthusiasm, enlightenment and confidence they communicated to me! I wept for joy. Sitting by myself in my room, I would shout as if I were addressing large crowds: 'Dear martyr compatriots! This is what we need, this is our path to our liberation!' Since then, I had entire confidence in Lenin.[8]

What was in those inspirational Theses? Lenin's Theses laid out a strategy for revolution in colonial and non-European countries, a subject neglected in previous Communist treatises. The struggle against colonialism, Lenin maintained in the Theses, was a key component of Communism's quest to end the enslavement of the world's people by a small number of Western capitalists.

According to Lenin's treatise, the proletariat would first collaborate with the native bourgeoisie to destroy the colonial powers, then the dictatorship of the proletariat would eradicate the bourgeoisie along with "bourgeois prejudices" such as national and racial animosities, and would also destroy the "medieval influences of the clergy, the christian missions, and similar elements" and the "petty bourgeois pacifist confusion of the ideas and the policy of internationalism." Lenin called for "the closest union between all national and colonial liberation movements and Soviet Russia," and demanded "the subordination of the interests of the proletarian struggle in one nation to the interests of that struggle on an international scale."[9]

Ho Chi Minh was a nationalist in the sense that he had a special affection for Vietnam's people and favored Vietnamese unification and independence, but, from his reading of Lenin's Theses onward, he firmly adhered to the Leninist principle that Communist nations should subordinate their interests to those of the international Communist movement. The peoples of the world had to set aside national prejudices, he believed, and they needed to work together as partners to spread the global revolution, themes that he was discussing in his writings as early as 1922.[10] In Ho's opinion, Yugoslavia or an Asian Yugoslavia or any other entity that destroyed Communist unity for the sake of national interests or hatreds was despicable. Like the Soviets, Ho derided those who put nationalism ahead of Communism as "bourgeois nationalists" or "chauvinistic nationalists." When the feud between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union began in the late 1940s, Ho and his fellow Vietnamese Communists would bitterly denounce Tito for putting national concerns before those of international Communism.[11] They would also praise the Soviets for obliterating the Hungarian Communist regime of Imre Nagy when it tried to leave the Warsaw Pact for nationalistic reasons.[12] In the 1960s, after the conflicts between the Soviets and the Chinese had shattered the unity of the international Communist bloc, Ho Chi Minh would try to gather up the pieces and put it back together.

Throughout his life, Ho Chi Minh greatly admired the leaders of China and the Soviet Union, in whose countries he had lived for many years. He would work for the Comintern – the Soviet organization charged with promoting Marxist-Leninist revolution around the world – and for the Chinese Communist Army. As the leader of the Viet Minh during their war against the French, he would follow Chinese advice as if he had been given orders, and he would invite Chinese soldiers into Vietnam on several occasions.

The only piece of direct evidence employed in arguing that Ho Chi Minh disliked the Chinese and other foreigners was a comment he reportedly made in 1946 while defending his decision to let the French Army into northern Vietnam: "It is better to sniff French shit for a little while than to eat Chinese shit all our lives."[13] This bit of evidence is badly flawed. When Ho allegedly made this comment, China was largely under the control of the Chinese Nationalists, who were fervent anti-Communists and who were actively promoting Vietnamese

Communism's most powerful rival, the Vietnam Nationalist Party. Ho Chi Minh detested the Chinese Nationalists and wanted to be free of their influence, but this hatred did not translate into hatred of the Chinese in general, anymore than Harry Truman's animosity toward the Nazis translated into hatred of the Germans in general. The evidence available overwhelmingly indicates that Ho Chi Minh generally liked the Chinese as a people. Even if Ho had been referring to all Chinese, it easily could have been an attempt to trick his Western adversaries into thinking that there were not strong ties between the Vietnamese and Chinese Communists.

Further evidence of Ho's commitment to Communism came from his single-minded and unswerving dedication to one objective: the imposition of Communist government on Vietnam and the rest of the world. Ho's long career as a practitioner of Marxism-Leninism started in 1920, when he became a founding member of the French Communist Party. Three years later, the Soviets summoned him to Moscow to learn Leninist organizational methods and work for the Comintern. When Lenin died, in January of 1924, Ho waited in line to see the corpse for so long that his fingers and nose became frostbitten. In a tribute to Lenin, Ho wrote that the Asian peoples "see in Lenin the personification of universal brotherhood. They feel veneration for him which is akin to filial piety."[14] At the end of 1924, the Soviets transported Ho to Canton via the Trans-Siberian Express. Carrying orders to organize Vietnamese émigrés and other Asians into revolutionary groups, Ho was to work under the guidance and financial auspices of the Comintern. In Canton, he started a Communist organization called *Viet Nam Thanh Nien Cach Mang Hoi,* meaning Revolutionary Youth League. In conformity with Lenin's theories, Ho sought temporary alliances with non-Communist Vietnamese. As he wrote in the Revolutionary Youth League's journal, "we must destroy the counterrevolutionary elements," but only "after having kicked the French out of our borders."[15] Ho enrolled some of his most gifted followers in a Chinese military academy, including several who would later become his top generals.

In early 1930, the Comintern sent Ho to Hong Kong, where he welded two factions of Vietnamese Communists into a single new organization called the Vietnamese Communist Party, subordinate to the Far Eastern Bureau of the Comintern in Shanghai. On the day that he founded the Vietnamese Communist Party, Ho made the party's ideological alignment quite clear, asserting that the party belonged to a "revolutionary camp" led by the Soviet Union and supported by "the oppressed colonies and the exploited working class throughout the world." The stated goal of the Vietnamese Communist Party was to "overthrow French imperialism, feudalism, and the reactionary Vietnamese capitalist class," all of which belonged to the "counterrevolutionary camp of international capitalism and imperialism whose general staff is the League of Nations."[16]