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Politics

Leading light's past life still in the shadows

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Ho Chi Minh

Pierre Brocheux's concise biography of Ho Chi Minh pulls together some new and old sources on the life and times of this puzzling man, the first President of independent Vietnam and the inspiration of anticolonial warriors around the globe.

At times, Brocheux succeeds in making Ho's seeming contradictions understandable. He paints him as an inspiring wartime leader who went to war reluctantly. He makes vivid Ho's efforts to achieve a settlement with France at the end of the Second World War, when he was prepared to yield to French rule for a five-year transitional period, until French insistence on the separate status of the southern region (then known as Cochinchina) caused negotiations to break down. But overall, this book relies too heavily on anecdotal history (which the Vietnamese themselves prefer) and never attempts a serious analysis of Ho's position within his own Communist Party.

The book, which was written for a French audience and appears here in a translation by Clarke Duiker, stops short of full coverage of Ho's final years during the US-Vietnam War. Brocheux chooses not to enter into some of the more contentious issues in Vietnamese political history and ignores the major questions regarding Ho's importance within the Communist International organisation (Comintern).

These choices have advantages and disadvantages: on the positive side, Brocheux gives the reader a consistent picture that conforms in most respects to official Hanoi biographies. The drawback to this approach is that it creates a false sense of omniscience, when in fact there are large stretches of Ho's life that remain obscure. As Brocheux admits, no biographer has had access to the archives of the Vietnamese Communist Party, and published collections of Vietnamese documents omit records of many serious policy debates.

Two main questions about this charismatic leader still require closer examination. The first is the nature of his early career, when he attached himself to the Comintern in exchange for its support of Vietnam's independence struggle. My reading of Comintern archives led me to conclude that Ho was actually a more minor operative than he was later portrayed by Soviet and Vietnamese authors. In 1930, for example, he was not the Comintern envoy for South-East Asia but a familiar hand who turned up at the Comintern bureau in Shanghai to fill the breach when the European agent, Jean Cremet, disappeared in China. Nor was he, as Brocheux writes, a Comintern representative in Europe for five years.

The second and most important puzzle of Ho's life is the nature of his power after the Communist Party resurfaced in 1951 as the Lao Dong or Workers' Party.

At this time, the new party newspaper *Nhan Dan* (*The People*) wrote that Ho was the soul of the Vietnamese revolution, but that Truong Chinh, the party's general secretary, was "the builder and commander". This would seem to have been a direct challenge to Ho's authority, and an issue that the biographer needs to confront.

Yet Brocheux makes only passing references (seven in all) to the rival leader and does not include him in a discussion of responsibility for the excesses of land reform, even though he was removed from his party leadership position in 1956 as the "correction of errors" began.

Brocheux continues to discuss Ho as though he lived in a political vacuum, speculating about his reliance "on the experience of the Chinese advisers" after 1950. Nowhere does he address the problem of Ho's position within the Central Committee or his relationships with the men who wielded power more anonymously, including Le Van Luong, who organised the party "rectification" drive that removed many middle-class Viet Minh leaders from positions of influence.

Interestingly, when Brocheux does have access to a Communist Party source from the Chinese side, a picture of acute political disagreement comes into focus. A reference to a Chinese Central Committee meeting in 1963 quotes Liu Shaoqi calling Ho "a rightist" and criticising his decision to refuse the chairmanship of the Workers' Party, as well as his delay in implementing land reform. Presumably there were other members of Ho's party more acceptable to the Chinese. The problem is that a leader who has been politically emasculated, as Ho clearly was, does not make good fodder for biographers.

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