

Comparing Aung San and Ho Chi Minh: The Making of a Cult of Personality

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Abstract

Both Myanmar and Vietnam gained their independence from their European colonizers through popular uprisings led by inspiring leaders. Aung San and Ho Chi Minh have since become venerated heroes and “fathers” of their respective nations; the people still raise their pictures and chant their names at public rallies or protests. However, they held vastly different ideologies and carried out their independence movements very differently. This paper examines Aung San and Ho Chi Minh’s different strategies, models of leadership, and political ideologies. It looks at how these differences influenced their enduring legacy in the nations they helped create, and explores whether they are the subjects of a cult of personality.

Keywords: Myanmar, Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh, Aung San, Cult of Personality, Independence, Southeast Asia

Introduction

As colonialism gave way to independence movements in the middle of the 20th century, the world saw the birth of numerous new nation-states, and with them, many fathers-of-the-nation were created throughout Africa and Southeast Asia. These leaders became symbols of their nations and the flags around which the masses rallied; peoples did not imagine their countries separately from their founding fathers. Images of these leaders continue to evoke emotional and nationalistic responses. Such is the case in Southeast Asia. Decades after his death, Aung San’s name is chanted and his face appears on posters, along with that of his daughter Aung San Suu Kyi, when people rally to demand democracy in Myanmar (Burma). In Vietnam, Ho

Chi Minh is still affectionately referred to as “Uncle Ho,” and his mausoleum has become a pilgrimage destination for loyal followers.¹ Both Aung San and Ho Chi Minh led populist mass uprisings, spent time abroad, had an affiliation with communism to one degree or another, and dealt with Japanese occupations in the midst of their

¹ Pierre Brocheux, *Ho Chi Minh: A Biography*, trans. Claire Duiker (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 180.

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struggles. Both saw their nations achieve independence, at least to some extent, in the 1940s, and both became venerated heroes of their respective countries. However, they had strikingly different tactics and approaches to politics and vastly dissimilar personalities – with Ho being charismatic and Aung San often indelicate. As such, they became legendary figures for different reasons. This paper seeks to answer to what extent their unique strategies and models of leadership affected the nature of their movements and the way they continue to be perceived in the eyes of their followers. It also explores whether their followings constitute a “cult of personality.” This paper defines “cult of personality” as the near worship of a leading figure or hero by the masses, often exhibited through unquestioning flattery and praise, created using mass media, propaganda, and other means to form an idealized image of the usually charismatic subject.²

While analyses and biographies of Ho Chi Minh are numerous, many parts of his life remain obscure as many stories may be more propaganda than fact, portraying Ho as perpetually benevolent, modest, and celibate – virtues deeply admired in Vietnamese culture.³ Secondary writings on Aung San in English are few, but many of his speeches and writings have been translated and compiled. As such, this study relies principally on the writings and speeches of Aung San and Ho Chi Minh and, where possible, also draws on analyses from others who have read the same documents and have provided valuable insight into the characters of the men behind them. The paper is divided into three sections: the first will examine Aung San’s and Ho Chi Minh’s backgrounds, namely their early lives, influences, and entries into politics. The second will analyze their movements, including ideologies, tactics, and the nature of their following. This paper does not attempt a chronological account; rather, important points in the development of the movements will be highlighted. Finally, this paper will look at the impact of the findings in the previous two sections on the leaders’ legacies. This study proposes that the two leaders were popular for different reasons. Aung San became a popular personality because of his democratic and inclusive policies while Ho Chi Minh’s policies became popular because of his charismatic personality and the tactics he used to create an idealized image. The differences lead to the conclusion that the

people’s love of Ho Chi Minh is every bit a cult of personality -- a devotion to and love of the man and the ideology he embodies -- whereas the love of Aung San instead revolves around the desire for the implementation of the policies for which he stood.

Background

Aung San was born in 1915 in Natmauk, a small town in Central Burma, to a family with a legacy of resistance.⁴ His great uncle led a resistance movement against the British before being captured and beheaded; this story was a source of inspiration to Aung San.⁵ Cultural traditions and nationalism were strong in the region. Aung San grew up hearing myths of the country’s past, which are reflected in his speeches’ many historical references, used to arouse passion in his audiences.⁶ His political consciousness increased through attendance at a Buddhist National school, where people were aware of their colonial status and desired self-determination.⁷ While Aung San was intelligent and a top student, he had poor English and was impolite, moody, and lacked tact, which made him somewhat of an outcast.⁸ Nonetheless, he took part in debates and edited the school journal.⁹ While attending Rangoon University, he was exposed to Western thought, both through classes and through reading radical authors such as Marx, Lenin, and Stalin alongside Asian thinkers like Sun Yat Sen, Gandhi, Nehru, and Subhas Chandra Bose.¹⁰

Aung San started university at a time of heightened social unrest in Burma, just one year after a large popular uprising and subsequent harsh government crackdown on the revolutionary movement.¹¹ He soon became involved in student politics and was elected as a member of the Rangoon University Students’ Union (RUSU) executive from which he formed a group of fellow students that would become future allies and advisors in the

⁴ Aung San Suu Kyi, *Aung San of Burma* (Edinburgh: Kiscadale Publications, 1991): 1.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Josef Silverstein, introduction to *The Political Legacy of Aung San*, ed. Josef Silverstein (New York: Cornell South East Asia Program, 1993), 6.

⁷ Aung San Suu Kyi, *Aung San of Burma*, 3.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Silverstein, introduction, 8.

¹¹ Aung San Suu Kyi, *Aung San of Burma*, 4.

² Xin Lu and Elena Soboleva, “Personality Cults in Modern Politics: Cases from Russia and China,” *Centre for Global Politics Working Paper Series* (January 2014): 1.

³ Ibid.

independence movement.¹² As editor of the Union's magazine, he wrote an article critical of the ruling government and was expelled along with another writer, leading to indignation from the students and a large strike that gained sympathy across the country.¹³ The university was forced to take the students' concerns seriously: the principal retired, the expulsions were reversed, and the All Burma Students' Union was soon created, with chapters in every school across Burma. Aung San became widely known and by 1938 was elected president of RUSU, as well as his newly-formed All Burma Students' Union.¹⁴ This movement catapulted his political career. He left university later in 1938, only a short while after beginning to study law, and became a member of the nationalistic "We-Burmese" organization. This was the beginning of the country's long road to independence.¹⁵

Ho Chi Minh's early life is more unclear than that of Aung San. For example, details including his real name and date of birth still are not conclusively known. However, he was most likely born in 1890 as Nguyen Sinh Cung to a non-proletarian and non-peasant family.¹⁶ His father was jailed in 1907 for his part in an anti-French movement, passing on hostility towards the French to Ho.¹⁷ Unlike Aung San, he was uneducated, dropping out of secondary school in 1910 before obtaining his diploma.¹⁸ Facts become even more unclear at this point, which was possibly intentional as part of Ho's attempt to create his own legend, which he also did through later writing two autobiographies.¹⁹ The common account of his time after leaving school is that he was a drifter for two years before taking a job as a cook on a ship, a role that allowed him to travel the world.²⁰ Official biographies, which may be more propaganda than fact, say that he spent some time in America where he became convinced of the evil of American capitalism.²¹ However,

his official interest in politics was not documented until 1919 in France.

Ho lived in Paris at the end of the First World War where he connected with members of the French Socialist Party and also founded a Vietnamese network called the Association of the Annamite Patriots.²² Through the friends he met there, he was introduced to the writings and ideologies of Lenin, who would become his greatest political influence.²³ He read Lenin's "Thesis on the National and Colonial Questions," the three key points of which formed the strategies Ho used in Vietnam: uniting proletarian masses worldwide to end capitalism; supporting peasant movements against land owners in backward countries; and the immediate task of spurring bourgeois democratic national movements to pave the way for future proletarian socialist revolutions.²⁴ Ho first gained a reputation as an activist by lobbying foreign delegations for Vietnamese freedom during the Versailles Conference in Paris.²⁵ It was also in Paris where he actively started to shape his own identity, taking on the pseudonym Nguyen Ai Quoc – "Nguyen the Patriot."²⁶ He soon became well known to the French colonial administration, earning a meeting with the Minister of Colonies in the 1920s where he spoke quite boldly about the liberation of Vietnam.²⁷ Ho became frustrated with socialism and its ineffectiveness against imperialism, and sided with Lenin's Third International and joined the Soviet led Communist International (Comintern), an international organization of communist revolutionaries.²⁸ During this time Ho was intensely involved in writing both propaganda and for journals, and became known for his ability to charm those around him.²⁹ His work garnered the attention of French authorities and he was kept under constant surveillance, but in 1923 Ho evaded the police and set off for Moscow, where he hoped to meet Lenin and become active in the Comintern.³⁰ In Moscow he was involved at the Stalin School, which trained communists in subjects from economics to the development of revolution and the history

¹² Ibid. 9.

¹³ Ibid. 10.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid. 11.

¹⁶ Hammond Rolph, "Ho Chi Minh: Fifty Years of Revolution," *Studies in Comparative Communism* 1, no. 1 (1968): 58.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Brocheux, *Ho Chi Minh*, 177.

²⁰ Walden Bello, introduction to *Ho Chi Minh: Down With Colonialism!* ed. Walden Bello (New York: Verso, 2007), xi.

²¹ Rolph, "Fifty Years of Revolution," 59.

²² Brocheux, *Ho Chi Minh*, 14.

²³ Bello, introduction to *Ho Chi Minh*, Xi.

²⁴ Ibid. Xiii.

²⁵ Ibid. Xi.

²⁶ Rolph, "Fifty Years of Revolution," 59.

²⁷ Brocheux, *Ho Chi Minh*, 16.

²⁸ Ibid. 17.

²⁹ Ibid. 21.

³⁰ Ibid.

of communism.³¹ From there he actively began to prepare for revolution in Vietnam.

Two striking differences between Aung San and Ho Chi Minh can already be observed from their early beginnings. First, their personalities set them apart. Whereas Aung San was rude and abrasive, taking a long time to win people over, Ho was said by the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam to "exude(s) innate tact and delicacy," and he easily gathered admirers.³² Second, and importantly, were the differences between their political and ideological underpinnings. Aung San was fascinated by Marx, and used some of his principles, but was more concerned about nationalism and never became attached to communism.³³ Ho, on the other hand, never cared for Marx and thought class struggle too narrow; he was attached to Lenin's revolutionary form of communism from the beginning.³⁴ These differences would have a great effect on the direction of each leader's independence movements.

Independence Movements

Aung San became known for a number of characteristics early in his career: he was bold and honest to the point of brashness; he was a strong advocate of religious freedom and ethnic unity; and he was a highly pragmatic tactician. Josef Silverstein, who compiled the most extensive collection of Aung San's speeches and writing in English, wrote that he was flexible and rational in his approach to politics rather than systematic, willing to pursue whatever tactic or method would help achieve his

firmly held goals of independence and national unity.³⁵ This flexibility would enable him to win mass support and adopt new strategies when circumstance deemed it necessary.

One way in which Aung San's pragmatism manifested itself was in his willingness to receive help from whomever would offer.³⁶ This in itself was a change from his original plan. At first, his idea was to progress from mass mobilization and protests towards guerilla action to paralyze the British, but he soon saw that this was perhaps not the most effective strategy and outside aid, whether strategic, financial, or in the form of weapons, would be necessary.³⁷ In 1939, he formed the Freedom Bloc with the recently ousted Prime Minister Ba Maw, but soon the authorities began to arrest members and Aung San fled to India in 1940.³⁸ There he met Indian nationalists and gained admiration for their politicians and strategy.³⁹ After briefly returning to Burma, he went to China to try to get help from Chinese communists, but was unsuccessful and instead went to Japan where an alliance was formed with Colonel Suzuki who would aid the independence movement.⁴⁰ However, he soon regretted this alliance. While Aung San valued pragmatism, he valued honour and would not sacrifice his morals in the name of strategy.⁴¹ He did not agree with the actions or morality of the Japanese: "Their faithlessness and hypocrisy as well as...outlook and behaviour and their high-handedness turned us all anti-Japanese."⁴² Almost immediately, before the British had been overthrown, Aung San began to plan a resistance.

Aung San started to earn wide respect during his time in the military. The elites, both enemy and friend, foreign and Burmese, admired him for his boldness, honesty, sincerity, and tactical prowess. The Japanese Commander-in-Chief in Burma said the whole Japanese army respected Aung San because he did not love money, power, or personal life.⁴³ The Burmese army saw him as skilled and courageous and able to rally the men.⁴⁴ Even in

³¹ Ibid. 26.

³² Ibid. 28.

³³ Suu Kyi, *Aung San of Burma*, 13.

³⁴ Brocheux, *Ho Chi Minh*, 25. Marx believed that the oppressive nature of capitalism would cause workers to develop a revolutionary consciousness overtime and would rise up against the bourgeoisie in time. While Marx's Communist Manifesto formed the basis for Lenin's ideology, Lenin believed, in contrast, that the proletariat were not capable of developing a revolutionary consciousness on their own and needed a party of revolutionary intellectuals to instill this consciousness and become a vanguard of revolution. For a more in-depth analysis, see Peter Wiles, "Marxism Versus Leninism: What Will Remain of Either, for the Third World?" *Asian Perspective* 14, no. 1 (1990): 217.

³⁵ Silverstein, Introduction, 5.

³⁶ Suu Kyi, *Aung San of Burma*, 18.

³⁷ U Aung San, "Burma's Challenge," in *The Political Legacy of Aung San*, ed. Josef Silverstein (New York: Cornell South East Asia Program, 1993), 82-83.

³⁸ Suu Kyi, *Aung San of Burma*, 13.

³⁹ Ibid. 15.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 17.

⁴¹ Aung San, "Burma's Challenge," 85.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Suu Kyi, *Aung San of Burma*, 19.

his opposition to the British, Aung San earned their admiration. Though he had no love of the British administration, he put this aside and sought help from the allied forces against the Japanese in 1945.⁴⁵ He boldly introduced himself to General Slim of Britain as the representative of the provisional government of Burma and demanded status as an Allied commander.⁴⁶ Rather than being affronted, Slim appreciated his straightforwardness and honesty and allied with Aung San to end the Japanese occupation.⁴⁷

Aung San's popularity grew even more after he left the military to focus on politics in 1945. His choice to enter politics demonstrated his commitment to democracy and to the will and needs of the people. He had been offered a position of Burmese Deputy Inspector in the Burma Army, but after consulting with his colleagues, he decided to decline.⁴⁸ He replied saying that he would prefer a military career, but it was not his choice to make; rather it was decided by his colleagues and the needs of the people, revealing his true motivations.⁴⁹

This honesty, dedication, and self-sacrifice earned Aung San the confidence and love of the people. He drew large crowds and spoke at emotional events, such as funerals of those killed by colonial brutality, and was able to prevent violence while at the same time encouraging increased efforts for independence.⁵⁰ He challenged the public to join the movement: "Come on out if anybody really dares to fight for independence...let us compete in deeds."⁵¹ His speeches was not the most eloquent, but he was honest and bold and frequently appealed for the people's trust in his character: "I am in politics not because I want to brag. I am in politics because I want Burmese to be independent, because I want Burmese to prosper... I never think I personally gain by doing politics; I feel I am doing politics always at a personal loss."⁵² Far from arousing the

people into a fervour with promises of great success and wealth, he always appealed for reason and asked for patience.⁵³

Aung San also endeared himself to his fellow countrymen by his commitment to national unity and equality. Immediately after signing the Aung San-Attlee Agreement, the setup for independence, he began negotiations with ethnic minority groups, leading to the Panglong Conference.⁵⁴ A colleague, Tin Tut, said, "his greatest achievement in that field (of negotiations) was the complete confidence he had inspired among the frontier races and other minorities."⁵⁵ In his short book, *Burma's Challenge, 1946*, Aung San wrote that "we cannot confine the definition of a nationality to the narrow bounds of race, religion, etc.,"⁵⁶ and "a nation is not a racial or tribal community of people, but a community of races and tribes."⁵⁷ To create an equal playing field Aung San advocated for the right to self-determination and for minority rights, such as human rights, national and cultural rights, freedom of association, legislative representation, and affirmative action.⁵⁸

At times Aung San was incredibly blunt. When facing criticism from the press, he rebutted by saying, "To be frank they are like goat's testicles."⁵⁹ And when political parties slandered him, he did not waste time arguing with them: "We don't care if parties like us. We care only for mass unity."⁶⁰ This strength, willingness to speak forcefully, and ability to mobilize public opinion on his side, combined with his flexibility, negotiating tactics, and policies of unity and democracy led him to become Burma's most important person by the age of 32 and helped Burma to eventually attain independence in 1948, shortly after his assassination.

Ho Chi Minh conducted his revolution differently to Aung San. Whereas Aung San only left Burma when it became necessary, Ho built most of his movement outside

⁴⁵ Ibid. 30.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 31.

⁴⁸ Aung San, "Letter to Adm. Mountbatten," in *The Political Legacy of Aung San*, ed. Josef Silverstein (New York: Cornell South East Asia Program, 1993), 41.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Suu Kyi, *Aung San of Burma*, 38.

⁵¹ Aung San, "Explanation of the Break Between the AFPFL and the Burma Communist Party," in *The Political Legacy of Aung San*, ed. Josef Silverstein (New York: Cornell South East Asia Program, 1993), 48.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Suu Kyi, *Aung San of Burma*, 46.

⁵⁵ Ibid. 46-47.

⁵⁶ Aung San, "Burma's Challenge," 150.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 156.

⁵⁸ Aung San, "The Fourteen Points," in *The Political Legacy of Aung San*, ed. Josef Silverstein (New York: Cornell South East Asia Program, 1993), 67-69.

⁵⁹ Aung San, "Four Speeches of U Aung San on the Aung San-Attlee Agreement of January 27, 1947," in *The Political Legacy of Aung San*, ed. Josef Silverstein (New York: Cornell South East Asia Program, 1993), 57.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

of Vietnam, working with the Chinese, Soviets, and Vietnamese who had fled Vietnam. Though both revolutionaries relied on mass support, Ho relied on agitation and propaganda where Aung San pleaded for reason and trust. Thus, Ho became known for his speeches and writing and the example he exhibited as he traveled among the people. Lenin's theories and the Comintern's policies served as his guides throughout. He was not a theoretical innovator; rather, his prowess was in his ability to translate political concepts into successful tactics for independence.⁶¹

In the 1920s, under the pseudonym of Ly Thuy, Ho went to China to work with the Chinese Communist Party and founded an Indochinese revolutionary organization.⁶² He founded the Revolutionary Youth League of Vietnam and set up a school for revolutionaries from Vietnam, who were indoctrinated "with the cult of the 'lost Homeland'" - a deep sense of loss of the country's ideals due to occupation - and the spirit of sacrifice required to get it back.⁶³ In China, he wrote propaganda, published a journal of which he was the sole author, and wrote his ideas in a book called "The Revolutionary Path."⁶⁴ Through observance of the Chinese revolution, he learned the importance of mobilizing the peasantry, a tactic he would later use in Vietnam.⁶⁵ The Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) was founded in 1930 and Ho, now under the name "Old Chin" wandered through Vietnamese settlements in Siam to agitate the people for the cause.⁶⁶ During this time, he began to form the image of a benevolent and moralistic example and leader, believing "that a good example is better than a hundred lectures."⁶⁷ He would pass himself off as a Chinese merchant or a monk and live simply among the people. He would then set up evening meetings to discuss the state of Vietnam, where he spoke with simple, imagistic language filled with popular proverbs and anecdotes, and to the delight of his audience, performed short plays and songs about national heroes.⁶⁸

His appeal to the people upon the founding of the ICP is exemplified by the type of language Ho employed: "Workers, peasants, soldiers, youth, and school students!

Oppressed and exploited fellow countrymen! Sisters and Brothers! Comrades!...The French imperialists' barbarous oppression and ruthless exploitation have awakened our compatriots, who have all realized that revolution is the only road to survival and that without it they will die a slow death."⁶⁹ Through such language, Ho stirred up a hatred of the French and feelings of indignation and also empowered the people to believe they could win their freedom.

In 1931, during a crackdown on communists led by the French, Ho was arrested in Hong Kong and sentenced to death.⁷⁰ However, through much negotiating and manoeuvring by his lawyers, this fate was avoided, and the case received widespread public attention. Communist campaigns were orchestrated, the story of "Nguyen the Patriot" was on the front page of newspapers, and Ho was elevated to the status of a martyr.⁷¹ In order to reduce French pressure for extradition, he was helped to escape by the British through a ruse; it was announced in international media that Ho died from tuberculosis in 1932.⁷² After spending several more years in Moscow, teaching and learning at the Stalin School, Ho went to China for a number of years, and then finally, seeing the opportunity afforded by the instability of the Second World War in Indochina, he returned to Vietnam in 1941 after three decades abroad.⁷³

For the next several years, Ho used his formidable abilities as an organizer and inspirer to train the leaders and militants of the new Viet Minh party while awaiting Lenin's concept of "favourable moment."⁷⁴ This moment came in 1945 when the French were disarmed by the Japanese, who were in turn losing to the Allies.⁷⁵ Ho formed a provisional government, and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was born on August 26th, along with an icon who embodied the resistance and the nation.⁷⁶ However, Ho knew the fight for true independence was not over and appealed to the

⁶¹ Bello, introduction to *Ho Chi Minh*, xi.

⁶² Brocheux, *Ho Chi Minh*, 32.

⁶³ Ibid. 36.

⁶⁴ Ibid. 37.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid. 44.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 45.

⁶⁸ Ibid. 46.

⁶⁹ Ho Chi Minh, "Appeal on the Founding of the Indochinese Communist Party, 1930," in *Ho Chi Minh: Down With Communism!* ed. Walden Bello (New York: Verso, 2007), 39-40.

⁷⁰ Brocheux, *Ho Chi Minh*, 55.

⁷¹ Ibid. 57.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid. 62-69.

⁷⁴ Bello, introduction to *Ho Chi Minh*, xviii.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

nation: "Our struggle will be a long and hard one...Only unity and struggle will bring us independence."⁷⁷

From 1946 to 1956, Ho was at his peak as a leader, both as a negotiator at the highest level and in his ability to persuade the masses; in this period he was affectionately called "Uncle Ho."⁷⁸ Even when he made controversial decisions, or plans went awry, he was able to regain support or to direct the anger of the masses onto another leader, either in his party or from the opposition. His agreement with the French to recognize Vietnam as a state within the French union was highly criticized, but Ho was able to rationalize the decision to the people and called on them to trust him: "I, Ho Chi Minh, have always led you on the path to freedom. You know that I would rather die than sell out my country. I swear to you that I did not sell you out."⁷⁹ When the Viet Minh's radical land redistribution effort in 1953 led to abuses and mass killings, Ho was able to deflect blame onto his First Secretary so that he remained the "kindly uncle."⁸⁰

This image of the benign "Uncle Ho" also survived the Viet Minh's brutal campaign to rid itself of enemies, potential or actual.⁸¹ Many intellectuals, reformers, religious leaders, political rivals, and French loyalists were killed.⁸² The Communist Party's surveillance and security apparatus was used to squash any public movements or dissent against the party. For example, members of the 1956 "Humanism and Belles-Lettres" movement, calling for increased political freedoms, were arrested, lost their jobs, or had food rations taken and were lambasted in the media.⁸³

Ho also understood that mass support was necessary for victory; he relied on human relations and direct dialogue through verse and proverbs rather than by presenting arguments.⁸⁴ He had specific speeches for children and youth, women, the elderly, religious communities, the press, and national and international audiences and "seized every occasion to mingle with the crowd, to abolish the

distance between the leaders and the population."⁸⁵ The people were indoctrinated in the cause, made to attend monthly meetings where they were shown the cruelty of capitalism and the need to fight it, and were made to write self-criticisms – making them aware of the of their past wrongs and the wrongs of their classes.⁸⁶ The foundations of myth were soon created: an idealized portrait of a moralistic hero and a legendary tale of his past through biographical writings and speeches.⁸⁷ Ho strove to promote a fatherly image; he addressed the people as "my dear nephews" and referred to himself as "your uncle Ho."⁸⁸ People across the country began to celebrate his birthday with gifts and festivities; a reverend even offered a prayer to "Our God Ho Chi Minh."⁸⁹ This homage paid while he was alive foreshadowed the cult of personality that was to form after his death in 1969, six years before his nation was finally free from its long struggle at the end of the Vietnam War.

Legacy and Cult of Personality

Following Aung San's assassination by political rivals in 1947, Burma was plunged into decades of authoritarian and military rule and a ceaseless civil war between the country's many different ethnic groups. When the revolution against dictatorship began in 1988, Aung San's daughter, Aung San Suu Kyi, led the call for reform.⁹⁰ Though she was little known at the time, a million people showed up to hear her talk because of her name and the people marched with portraits of Aung San in hand.⁹¹ Indeed, part of Aung San's legacy is through his daughter, who seeks to emulate many of his qualities and echoes his call for democracy, unity, and self-sacrifice.⁹² Another major facet of his intellectual legacy was his stance on national unity. In today's strife, many Burmese citizens are calling for a "Second Panglong," in reference to the agreement sought by Aung San but never implemented.⁹³

⁷⁷ Ho Chi Minh, "Appeal for General Insurrection, 1945," in *Ho Chi Minh: Down With Communism!* ed. Walden Bello (New York: Verso, 2007), 49.

⁷⁸ Bello, introduction to *Ho Chi Minh*, xix.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* xx.

⁸⁰ Rolph, "Fifty Years of Revolution," 75.

⁸¹ *Ibid.* 71.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Brocheux, *Ho Chi Minh*, 163.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* 135.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* 100.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 138.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* 179.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* 88.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* 180.

⁹⁰ Silverstein, introduction, vii.

⁹¹ Matthew Rogers, introduction to *Aung San of Burma* by Aung San Suu Kyi (Edinburgh: Kiscadale Publications, 1991), vii.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Silverstein, introduction, 13.

Though the country has taken a drastically different path than the one he desired, the ideas of Aung San still dominate Burmese political thought and serve as the nation's symbols. His picture is in nearly every government office and home, and a national holiday commemorates his assassination.⁹⁴

While Aung San was popular before his death, he actively tried to stop a personality cult from forming: "No man, however great, can alone set the wheels of history in motion, unless he has the active support and cooperation of a whole people...We must...take proper care that we do not make a fetish of this cult of hero-worship."⁹⁵ It was after death that he truly became an idealized hero. He was a martyr and a symbol of a nation that could have been, but was taken from the Burmese people: "His assassination cut short a brilliant career and left the nation with no comparable figure to replace him."⁹⁶ The love of Aung San, therefore, is not so much a cult of personality, but a nostalgic memory of the hope that existed in 1947 and an inspiration of what can and still needs to happen.

While there is wide consensus, both domestically and in the international community, that Aung San was an honest man who sought the best for his country, "Ho Chi Minh has remained a figure of mystery and controversy."⁹⁷ He is both loved and reviled; some debate his true intentions and see him as deceptive and power-seeking, while others say he was dedicated to his country and a just society.⁹⁸ Some of this debate was his own doing; he was not straightforward about his political beliefs, only divulged vague details about his background, and used many pseudonyms to disguise his true identity.⁹⁹ Despite the contentious nature of his character and movement, Ho has become immortalized, not just in Vietnam but around the world. There are statues and shrines dedicated to him in Moscow, Thailand, and even in Madagascar: "Ho has become an object of veneration, literally, in temples dedicated to village spirits, national heroes, (and) bodhisattvas."¹⁰⁰ This dedication – the worship of the charismatic Uncle Ho by the Vietnamese people – is

exemplary of a cult of personality. It is debatable whether this cult of personality was of his own design, or whether Ho was sidelined by the Communist Party in their quest for an immortalized symbol of their political dominance. For instance, Ho desired his body to be burned and his ashes to be placed at four points in the country, but instead the party put his embalmed body on display in a mausoleum to attract pilgrims to the capital.¹⁰¹ However, Ho wrote two autobiographies, which projected his image as a revolutionary and the benevolent Uncle Ho, and he was a skilled propagandist. Therefore, he can be seen to have had an active role in shaping his own personality cult.¹⁰²

There is also another side to Ho's legacy that must be considered - that of antagonism and violence, bred by his revolutionary doctrine and willingness to use whatever tactics necessary to further his communist vision for Vietnam.¹⁰³ While Ho may have passed off blame for killings onto others, in condoning this form of rule, he bears a portion of responsibility for the contentious politics that remain in Vietnam.¹⁰⁴ This is evidence that Ho has two separate and competing legacies, a result of the dual image strategy he employed: playing the role of both a benevolent uncle to the people and that of a stern father when dealing with competitors.¹⁰⁵

Conclusion

From this brief look at their movements, one can see that the tactics and personalities of the two revolutionary leaders influenced people's perceptions of Aung San and Ho Chi Minh and contributed to differing legacies. Aung San was not an idealist, but was flexible and held firmly to his goals of independence and unity. Though he knew he needed the support of the people, he earned this through the attempt to be transparent, through tangible results, and by honestly requesting their support. This can be seen, for instance, through his speech daring the people of Burma to support the movement if they believed in independence. His pragmatism, rather than rigid idealism, and core goal of independence is evident through his willingness to accept help from various nations of differing political beliefs.

Ho Chi Minh on the other hand, was firmly communist, a goal which trumped nationalism, and was

⁹⁴ Ibid. 1.

⁹⁵ Aung San, "Burma's Challenge," 94.

⁹⁶ Silverstein, introduction, 1.

⁹⁷ William Duiker, Forward to *Ho Chi Minh: A Biography*, *Ho Chi Minh: A Biography*, by Pierre Brocheux (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), ix.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. 180.

¹⁰² Rolph, "Fifty Years of Revolution," 55.

¹⁰³ Brocheux, *Ho Chi Minh*, 187.

¹⁰⁴ Rolph, "Fifty Years of Revolution," 72.

¹⁰⁵ Bello, introduction to *Ho Chi Minh*, xxv.

only flexible when it served this goal. As such, he developed the love of the people and used it to obtain independence. Ho did this through branding himself as "Uncle Ho," stirring up anti-colonial hatred and fervour, and indoctrinating the people by making them attend monthly meetings filled with pro-Ho Chi Minh and anti-French and US messages. He also maintained his image by quickly passing guilt onto opponents and colleagues alike and by getting rid of dissidents.

Aung San remained committed to democracy, deferring to the desires of his colleagues and the people; Ho told the people his plans through his propaganda machine and used indoctrination to garner their loyalty. Thus, Aung San is respected by his people generations later and his model of leadership is longed for in a country that has seen successive authoritarian regimes. His daughter is a beloved symbol not just because of the work she has done and the ideals she holds, but because she is a testament of the principles for which Aung San strove. Ho Chi Minh, because of how his image was cultivated, both by himself and the communist party after his death, is instead worshipped in a cult of personality that sees only the face that was created and obscures the more ruthless and deceptive side of the man.

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