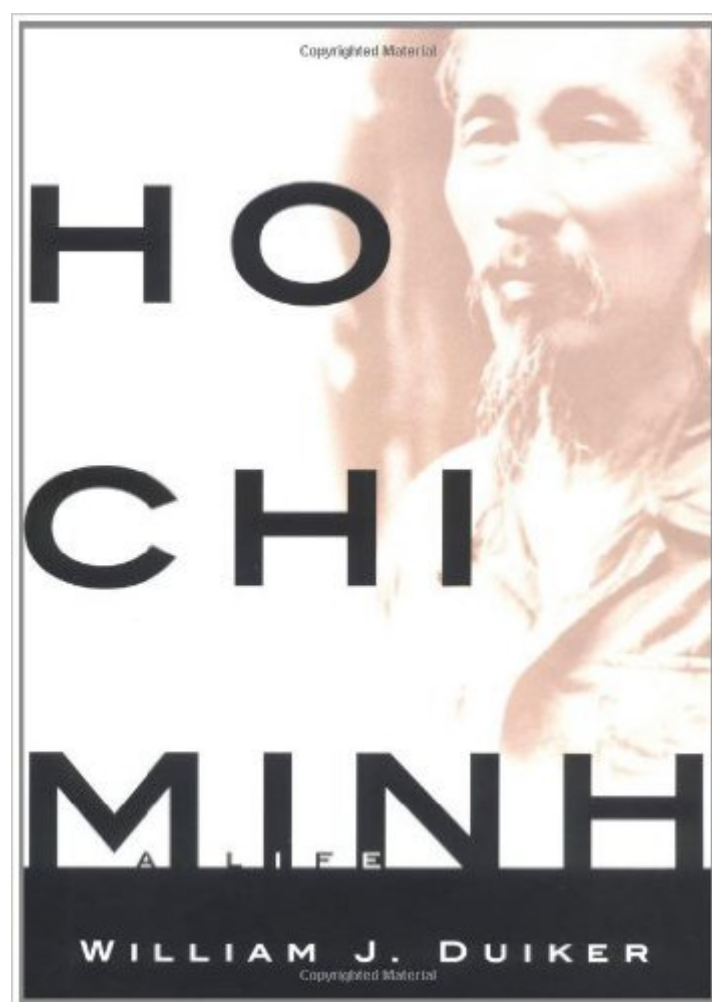


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Ho Chi Minh: A Life



Synopsis

To grasp the complicated causes and consequences of the Vietnam War, one must understand the extraordinary life of Ho Chi Minh, the man generally recognized as the father of modern Vietnam. Duiker provides startling insights into Ho's true motivation, as well as into the Soviet and Chinese roles in the Vietnam War.

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Customer Reviews

First, one should be very clear that there are really no other serious scholarly works on Ho. There are accounts by journalists and Vietnamese who knew Ho, but these are usually very shallow and involve little or no research. This book is a good general introduction to Ho Chi Minh and Vietnamese history, but lacks crucial insight into Ho's life after World War 2, which is very disappointing. Ho Chi Minh was a remarkable person if only for the number of languages he spoke (French, English, Russian, Chinese, Vietnamese) and the breadth of his knowledge and experience. He is very unlike the grim, close-minded communist stereotype. Ho's globe-trotting life, however, makes the biographer's job tremendously difficult, as he frequently went from one corner of the world to another, often living in secrecy or in remote jungles with a small group of colleagues. Conducting interviews with people who knew Ho and his colleagues is probably not possible today. Those still living who knew Ho would be very reluctant to speak candidly about him, especially with a stranger from overseas, now that he is such a politicized figure in Vietnam. And those willing to speak about him (usually derogatorily) are usually members of the Vietnamese diaspora who have an axe to

grind. Reading this book, you can really sense the difficulty of finding records of Ho's life in Russia, China and Vietnam. His life in France and Hong Kong is well researched, but there are gaping holes in the biography at the most critical junctures, especially after his return to Vietnam. Ho's decision to return to Vietnam after over 30 years abroad is not explained. Nor is his relationship to important figures such as Stalin, Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai.

This has been a good year of biographies for us social studies teachers. Short's excellent look at Mao, Bix's bio of Hirohito, and a tough but necessary read on Ataturk. After all of that reading and bucks spent on books I was looking forward to reading some fun stuff. But how could any good global studies teacher pass a new biography of Ho Chi Minh. He, like Ataturk, has only been on every New York State Global Regents for the last 6 years! And I certainly could not resist after seeing Duiker on c-span discussing the book. First and foremost...is it a good book? YES! It was very informative and highly readable once you made it past the opening chapters and got used to reading the endless Vietnamese names. Also, please note that while the book is readable, it is not a fast read. This book took me over three months to read, and I am a pretty avid reader with a decent background in Vietnamese history. So be warned, great book but time consuming. The book is well researched and documented. To me the highlights of the book dealt with Ho Chi Minh's political views, his history as a communist in not just Vietnam, but France, and the USSR. I enjoyed learning about all his various identities and all the places he travelled. But the best parts of the book I felt dealt with Ho Chi Minh at the end of WWII and his attempts to gain independence for Vietnam, his attempts to win over US support, and to negotiate with the French. Duiker did a great job with this time period. Also, Duiker points out which I did not know, how much more radical other members of the Vietnamese revolutionary movement were by the 1960's. I had always thought he was in complete charge like a Stalin or Mao and had no idea about the various leaders and views to surface towards the end of his life.

Ho Chi Minh is one of those figures who lend support to the "great man" theory of history. "Not only was Ho the founder of his party and later the president of the country, but he was its chief strategist and its most inspiring symbol. * * * Ho Chi Minh was half Lenin and half Gandhi." He is a man of myth and legend, and therefore a good subject for a responsible biography that demystifies him. Only in part, however, is HO CHI MINH: A LIFE a biography of Ho Chi Minh -- a/k/a, among others, Nguyen Sinh Cong, Nguyen Tat Thanh, and Nguyen Ai Quoc. The book also is a history of Vietnam over HCM's lifetime (1890-1969). Furthermore, it includes extensive accounts of the

internal politics and machinations of various Communist parties (Vietnamese, Indochinese, French, Chinese, and Comintern) -- the necessity of which I question, at least in such mind-numbing detail. As glad as I am that I read this full-blown biography-plus, I would have preferred a shorter biography of Ho Chi Minh aimed simply at providing the generalist reader with a responsible picture of the man. And while it goes quite a ways towards demystifying HCM, I'm not sure it succeeds altogether. Perhaps that's not possible. The overriding question concerning HCM is whether he was a Vietnamese patriot and nationalist or, instead, a communist/socialist revolutionary. Duiker's HCM is not exclusively either. According to Duiker, HCM certainly was a patriot and nationalist. Beyond that, he was implacably opposed to imperialism and colonialism, not just in Indochina but around the world. That mindset predisposed him against capitalism, as practiced worldwide, and, derivatively, against democracy and republican government.

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