**Chinese and Soviet involvement in Vietnam**



Ho Chi Minh photographed during a visit to the People’s Republic of China.

Across the border to the north, Chinese and Soviet involvement in Vietnam was also unfolding. As the world’s largest communist powers, both the Soviet Union (USSR) and the People’s Republic of China also lent moral, logistic and military support to North Vietnam. Both Moscow and Beijing hoped to expand communism into the Asian hemisphere. Not only would Asian expansion tip the balance against the West, it would also serve Russian and Chinese national interests. Neither the USSR nor China were frank or open about the materiel and logistic support they gave Hanoi. To this day there is much speculation about the exact level and types of support given to North Vietnam. What can safely be argued is that this support was vital to Hanoi and a major factor in the successes of its military and insurgency operations.

The true extent of Ho Chi Minh’s communism is open to question, however there is no doubt that Ho had strong links with the USSR. The young Nguyen Sinh Cung gravitated towards Marxism in late 1919, after his dreams of Vietnamese independence were rejected by peace-brokers in Paris. In 1920 he became one of the foundation members of the French Communist Party. Three years later he traveled to Moscow, where he undertook further studies in communist theory and international activism. He also became Vietnam’s delegate to the Comintern, a Soviet-led committee which aimed to promote and support socialist revolution around the world. There is no doubt that Ho Chi Minh had the pedigree of a communist – but it is also true that he was no puppet. Unlike some of the pro-Soviet rulers of eastern Europe, Ho’s first allegiance was to his own country and its people, not to Moscow, the Comintern or ‘world revolution’.

After World War II, Soviet Russia gave only marginal support for communist movements in Vietnam, which was then well outside Moscow’s sphere of influence. Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin wanted to maintain his post-war alliance with the West, temporarily at least, and did not wish to antagonise them by backing the Viet Minh in 1946-47. Stalin also had an immovable distrust of Asian communist groups, believing them to be weak, undisciplined and tainted by self-interest and nationalism. By 1949, the situation had changed markedly. US-Soviet tensions were rising; and Mao Zedong’s victory in China (October 1949) projected the Cold War deep into Asia. In January 1950, Moscow belatedly recognised Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh as the ‘official’ rulers of Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh journeyed to Moscow and sought Soviet military backing for his war of independence against the French. But Stalin, whose attentions were concentrated on Europe, rejected this. Stalin instead encouraged Mao Zedong to support Ho Chi Minh in his quest to reclaim Vietnam.

***Early links with Beijing***

The Chinese already had a history of working with the Viet Minh. Chinese communists and the Viet Minh had for several years provided each other with cover and material support during their struggles to control their countries. This relationship was particularly strong in border regions. Chinese communist forces often retreated into North Vietnam, to rest or prepare for further offensives. In return, the Chinese provided the Viet Minh with weapons, munitions and training. Beijing continued this assistance in the early 1950s, providing significant amounts of military aid to Hanoi, while also supplying North Korea during the Korean War (1950-53). Most Chinese supplies began in Kunming, Yunnan province, where they were transported to the Vietnamese border then carried down a narrow jungle track (the forerunner of the famous ‘Ho Chi Minh trail’).

Chinese communism also had some influence on Vietnamese communist ideology, organisation and policy. Chinese-supplied advice and technical expertise supported Hanoi’s land reforms and industrialisation program during the early to mid 1950s. When the Indochinese Communist Party was reformed as the Lao Dong in early 1951, it embraced structures and organisation modelled on those of the Chinese Communist Party. The rhetoric that passed between the Viet Minh and Beijing was usually effusive. Hoang Van Hoan, the Viet Minh’s chief diplomat in China, was reportedly offered unconditional support and a “blank cheque” for the supply of equipment. And while Chinese support was flowing, Ho Chi Minh was prepared to return the gushing praise. At a ceremony in February 1951, he told a visiting Chinese delegation:

“Because of the geographic, historic, economic and cultural connections between Vietnam and China, the Chinese revolution has had tremendous impact upon the Vietnamese revolution. Our revolution shall follow, as we have already seen, the course of the Chinese revolution. By relying on the Chinese revolutionary lessons, and relying on ‘Mao Zedong Thought’, we have further understood the thoughts of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin, so that we have won great victories in the last year. This we shall never forget.”

***A shift in focus***

The death of Stalin (March 1953) and the stabilisation of events in Europe drew Moscow’s attentions back to south-east Asia. Soviet delegates at the Geneva conference urged the Viet Minh to accept a negotiated peace and the proposed transitional division. A divided Vietnam, they argued, would allow for a period of stabilisation: the communist regime in the North would be able to consolidate its power, undertake economic reform and improve its military capability. Moscow was also nervous that if the US became militarily involved in Vietnam, it may be forced to reciprocate. Under pressure from the USSR, Ho Chi Minh advised his representatives in Geneva to sign the accords.

The Gulf of Tonkin incident and US combat involvement triggered an escalation in Chinese support. This came mainly in the form of equipment and construction. In 1965 Beijing sent several thousand engineering troops across the border, to assist in building and repairing roads, railways, airstrips and critical defence infrastructure. **Between 1965 and 1971 more than 320,000 Chinese troops were deployed in North Vietnam. The peak year for this was 1967, when there were around 170,000 Chinese in the DRV**. Their work on military installations naturally meant that Chinese troops were susceptible to heavy American bombing; an estimated 1,000 Chinese were killed in the North in the late 1960s. Beijing also supplied Hanoi with large amounts of military equipment, including trucks, tanks and artillery.

***The Soviets step in***

Soviet support remained lukewarm through the 1950s and early 1960s. **The USSR supplied North Vietnam with information, technical advisors and moral support** – but Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev preferred to limit his backing and keep the USSR at arm’s length from the unfolding trouble in Vietnam. Khrushchev, however, was removed as leader in October 1964, shortly after the Gulf of Tonkin incident. The new Soviet premier, Aleksei Kosygin, was eager to consolidate his power and placate hardliners in the Soviet military. In November 1964 Kosygin sent a public message of support to the National Liberation Front (the NLF, or Viet Cong) and announced a visit to North Vietnam in the New Year. The Soviet leader arrived in February 1965, when he met with members of the Lao Dong Politburo and NVA commanders. **They signed a defence treaty that would provide North Vietnam with both financial aid and military equipment and advisors. A public statement from the Kosygin delegation read:**

“The Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), the outpost of the socialist camp in south-east Asia, is playing an important role in the struggle against American imperialism and is making its contribution to the defence of peace in Asia and throughout the world. The governments of the USSR and DRV have examined the situation… Both governments resolutely condemn the aggressive actions of the USA on August 5th 1965, and especially the barbaric attacks by American aircraft on DRV territory on February 7th and 8th 1965… The USSR will not remain indifferent to ensuring the security of a fraternal socialist country and will give the DRV necessary aid and support.”

**Moscow now became North Vietnam’s main benefactor**, increasing its aid to Hanoi in response to the US military escalation of 1965. The true extent of this support has never been fully disclosed, though it was certainly substantial. **There were widespread reports in 1966 that North Vietnamese fighter pilots, air crews and anti-aircraft gunners had received training in the USSR. It has also been subsequently revealed that around 3,000 Soviet personnel served in North Vietnam in 1964-65 and were responsible for shooting down US planes. By the spring of 1967, TIME Magazine was reporting that a “river of aid” was flowing from Russia into North Vietnam. According to some analysts, by the late 1960s more than three-quarters of the military and technical equipment received by North Vietnam was coming from the USSR. And unlike the equipment and weapons supplied by Beijing – which demanded deferred payment – most Soviet assistance was supplied as aid rather than loans.**

***Sino-Soviet split***

Ho Chi Minh was able to exploit Chinese and Soviet jealousies of one another to gain maximum support for his goals in South Vietnam. From 1965 until early 1968, the rivalry between Beijing and Moscow also served to scuttle multiple Soviet-inspired proposals for peace talks between the Vietnamese communists and the United States.
**Thomas J. Christensen**

To complicate matters in Vietnam, the relationship between the USSR and China deteriorated through the 1960s. Changes in leadership in Moscow, coupled with the 1966 Cultural Revolution in China, fuelled tension between the two communist superpowers. By 1968, almost one million Soviet troops were massing on the Chinese border; the following year, a series of border clashes led to around 200 deaths. The Sino-Soviet split effectively forced Hanoi to choose between Beijing and Moscow. It was not a difficult decision. In November 1968, the USSR and North Vietnam signed a new set of military and economic agreements. According to one report, they “provided for large Soviet deliveries of food, petroleum, transportation equipment, iron and steel, other metals, fertilisers, arms, munitions and other commodities, for strengthening [North] Vietnam’s defences”. Mao Zedong responded by winding back Chinese aid and ordering the withdrawal of all Chinese personnel from North Vietnam. Russian supplies bound for Hanoi still had to pass through Chinese territory, where they were often held up by suspicious officials.

- See more at: http://alphahistory.com/vietnam/chinese-and-soviet-involvement/#sthash.ga2vKUbx.dpuf