

SOURCES AND METHODS

A blog of the History and Public Policy Program



BLOG POST

The Myth of the Wilsonian Moment

By [Brett Reilly](#) on June 17, 2019

Newly digitized sources at France's colonial archive and national library call into question the long running claim that Vietnamese communist leader Hồ Chí Minh experienced a "Wilsonian moment" during the Versailles Peace Conference.



HISTORY AND PUBLIC POLICY PROGRAM



COLD WAR INTERNATIONAL HISTORY PROJECT

COLD WAR

VIETNAM

Hồ Chí Minh at the French Communist Party Congress, Marseille, 1921. Source: [Bibliothèque nationale de France](#).

Ho Chi Minh's Embrace of the Communist International in 1919-1920

SHARE ➔

Was Woodrow Wilson responsible for Hồ Chí Minh's embrace of communist internationalism? Since the 1960s, some historians have hinted as much.

Others argue forcefully for a "Wilsonian Moment" during the Versailles peace conference in late 1919 and early 1920, and suggest that Hồ preferred the American president's concept of self-determination above all other political philosophies. Only after authoring a petition to Wilson and suffering his indifference would French activists in the metropole radicalize Hồ according to many authors, which spurred his embrace of Vladimir Lenin and communism in 1921.

Most recently, Erez Manela and Fredrik Logevall have advanced this theory in their respective international histories [The Wilsonian Moment](#) and [Embers of War](#). Ken Burns also featured a version of this story in his documentary *The Vietnam War*.

To the contrary, newly digitized archival sources at France's [colonial archive](#) and [national library](#) reveal that Hồ Chí Minh made his own moment during the Versailles conference. Far from passive or deferential, Hồ was himself an agent of radicalization. As Versailles concluded, he was already at work convincing French socialists to join Lenin's Third International.

Indeed, there is no record of Hồ invoking Woodrow Wilson in his speeches or writings at this time. This is not so surprising. After all, Wilson's ideas would not have satisfied Hồ's concern for national *and* class liberation.

Hồ's Petition

In the summer of 1919, the French police became aware that Hồ Chí Minh – then using the name Nguyễn Ái Quốc – was in Paris. He had obtained his identity card with help from Socialist politician Jean Longuet, the grandson of Karl Marx, keeping in contact with him and Marcel Cachin, a founder of the French Communist Party ([page 265](#)). Hồ drew the police's attention when he signed a petition on behalf of "the Group of Annamese [Vietnamese] Patriots," addressed to the French government.

Hồ sent copies of the petition to all the political delegations at the Versailles Conference, including smaller nations such as Nicaragua ([page 35-36](#)). He showed no favoritism to Wilson, and Hồ's correspondence with the American embassy and Wilson's secretary do not mention a meeting request ([page 36](#)). Instead, Hồ sought and received meetings with the French political establishment – the Group of Annamese Patriots' intended audience, and the one capable of initiating colonial reform in Indochina.

Though the face of the petition, Hồ was not its author. Police informants learned that he did not know French grammar well enough to write the text ([page 107](#)). The police also noted that the Group of Annamese Patriots was an organization founded earlier by Phan Văn Trường and Phan Châu Trinh, two more senior Vietnamese activists living in Paris ([page 10](#)). Written by the lawyer Phan Văn Trường, the petition's concepts were drawn from Phan Châu Trinh's earlier political writings. Indeed, when sending the petition to French officials, Hồ also included an article on Phan Châu Trinh's activism ([page 7](#)).

The petition's requests were moderate measures that all Group members agreed upon, including freedom of the press and the liberation of political prisoners in Indochina. Although the petition noted that all nations were entitled to "self determination" – a concept Lenin had advocated for since 1914 and which Wilson had elevated again before Versailles – the text did not invoke Wilson or his Fourteen Points.

The French police theorized that Hồ had been the sole signatory to avoid scrutiny of Phan Văn Trường and Phan Châu Trinh, who had been arrested by the French police during World War I ([page 10](#)). Yet it was clear that Hồ was more active and radical than his elders. Hồ had also arranged for the petition's [publication](#) in *L'Humanité*, the French Socialist Party's journal, but omitted the introductory paragraphs and mention of "self-determination."

"The French Proletariat welcomes Wilson." Unlike Hồ, the French Socialist Party's leaders [effusively praised](#) Wilson. Le Populaire, 14 December 1918.

Even if Hồ invoked Wilson's name, he would have been aligned with France's radical socialists. Marcel Cachin and Ludovic-Oscar Frossard – Socialist Party leaders who would found the French Communist Party – gave a conditional [endorsement](#) to the American president "because this *grand bourgeois* speaks, in this moment, the language of the [Second] International," Frossard [wrote](#) in late 1918. But of course there

was no lost Wilsonian moment when the French Communist Party's founders could have been turned away from Leninism and later Stalinism. The *grand bourgeois* Wilson was an expedient ally, but ultimately a foe of the class-based revolution sought by Frossard and Cachin, and indeed H

Communist Activism

The omission of Wilson from H's writings was a sign that he was already engaged in socialist political activism at the time of the Versailles conference, which ran through 1919 and concluded in January 1920.

In fact, the Paris police reported that he was a fixture at gatherings of the French Social Party during the legislative elections in November 1919 ([page 220](#)). By this time, H was [calling](#) himself the "[secretary of the Annamese Socialist Party](#)," corroborating accounts that he had joined the French Socialist Party in late 1919. By February 1920, H began giving a [series](#) of [lectures](#) on "Bolshevism in Asia" at meetings of the International Union of Socialist Youth in Paris. At other socialist meetings, he argued the Vietnamese had lived in "a form of communism" before the exploitation of "French capitalists." ([page 229](#))

By at least March 1920, H was imploring French socialists to embrace Lenin – the only political figure he invoked by name and endorsed in 1919-1920 – and leave the socialist Second International, based in Paris, for Lenin's Moscow-based communist Third International. At one of Paris' Socialist Youth meetings on March 25, H spoke in favor of the Third International, telling the members that Vietnam and other colonized countries would obtain their independence thanks to Lenin's principles ([page 229](#)).

Later that year, in November, H was a delegate to the national conference of French Socialist Youth, where he and others voted to join Lenin's Third International. H told his fellow travelers that "only Lenin's theses and the communist system will establish among all countries a universal republic" ([page 229](#)). The following month he attempted to publish an article in *L'Humanité* that denounced the "hydra" of capitalism and colonialism, calling on the international proletariat to lead a world revolution ([page 371-373](#)).

As 1920 came to a close, H would attend the French Socialist Party's national congress in Tours, representing his Socialist Party branch in Paris. He had earlier helped convince his branch members to vote

in favor of the Third International. Now, he would join Cachin, Frossard, and a majority of delegates at Tours in siding with Lenin and formatting the French Communist Party.

Initially, Hô did not close off other pathways to support his revolutionary ideals, but gradually he became more doctrinaire. He had joined the Human Rights League and became a Freemason in June 1922 ([page 109](#)), but in November that year, the Third International barred party members from joining the Free Masons. Hô thereafter denounced both, stating that one could not be a communist and a Free Mason, because these latter groups “practice class cooperation and not class struggle” ([page 885](#); [page 1141](#)). A few months later, Hô would travel to Moscow for the first of two stints spent at the Comintern, with the latter coming in the 1930s at the height of Stalin’s repression.

Legacy

Weeks after Hô took part in the founding of the Vietnamese Communist Party in February 1930, he wrote a letter in English to the international communist community describing Vietnam’s path toward communism. Here was one of Hô’s first mentions (if not his first) of Woodrow Wilson ([page 31](#)). In explaining the righteousness of communism, Hô claimed that Wilson had “deceived” the colonial peoples in 1919.

It was a theme he would reprise later in his career, along with attempts to obfuscate his communist credentials and minimize his knowledge of communist politics in interwar France. It was an effective tool that the Democratic Republic of Vietnam sought to use to undermine Washington’s Cold War justification for its actions in the Vietnam War.

During the war, this version of events was eagerly accepted by activists and writers who criticized America’s policies toward Vietnam and sought to downplay Hô’s connections to communist internationalism. Now, it remains a favored parable on the flaws of American internationalism during World War I and the Cold War.

Yet these documents show that Hô did not wait for Wilson’s moment during 1919-1920. Instead, he made his own moment, endorsing Lenin’s principles as a means for national and class liberation, and bringing Vietnamese and French socialists along with him to the Third International. ➡

BRETT REILLY

READ MORE



HISTORY AND PUBLIC POLICY PROGRAM

The History and Public Policy Program makes public the primary source record of 20th and 21st century international history from repositories around the world, facilitates scholarship based on those records, and uses these materials to provide context for classroom, public, and policy debates on global affairs. *Read more*



COLD WAR INTERNATIONAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Cold War International History Project supports the full and prompt release of historical materials by governments on all sides of the Cold War. Through an award winning Digital Archive, the Project allows scholars, journalists, students, and the interested public to reassess the Cold War and its many contemporary legacies. It is part of the Wilson Center's History and Public Policy Program. *Read more*