

Nguyen Ai Quoc - Ho Chi Minh's journey to become a communist (1911 - 1920)

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● **Abstract:** With outstanding intellect and extraordinary energy, after 10 years (from 1911 to 1920) of living, working, and being active in many countries, Nguyen Ai Quoc had transformed from a patriot to become the first communist in Vietnam. Upon acquiring Marxism - Leninism - the great truth of the times, he put the national liberation revolution in Vietnam into the orbit of the proletarian revolution and brought the Vietnamese revolution to great victories. The article clarifies Nguyen Ai Quoc's journey to become a communist; analyzes the cause of success and the meaning of that event to the history of the Vietnamese nation in particular and the history of mankind in general.

● **Keywords:** Nguyen Ai Quoc - Ho Chi Minh, oppressed nations, Lenin's Theses, Communist Party, communists.

1. Nguyen Tat Thanh's belongings in the departure to find a way to save the country

Nguyen Tat Thanh was born and raised when Vietnam was a colony of France, and the Vietnamese people suffered from being slavery. Although the movements against the French colonialists took place continuously, blood was continuously poured down, but the "tree of independence" has not yet bloomed and produced fruit. The crisis and stalemate over the path for national liberation prompted Nguyen Tat Thanh to leave the country and to find a new way to save the nation. Patriotism is the tradition of Vietnamese people, but being willing to embark on a journey to find a way to save the country, that courage is not available to everyone, and finding the right direction for the nation is even more difficult. That fact was mentioned by Ho Chi Minh when he answered an interview with the American journalist Anna Louise Strong: "The people of Vietnam, including my own father, often wondered who would help them to remove the yoke of French control. Some said Japan, others Great Britain, and some said the United States. I saw that I must go abroad to see for myself.

After I had found out how they lived, I would return to help my countrymen⁽¹⁾. However, going abroad is going to which country? And how to go? Those questions were answered by Nguyen Tat Thanh with a bold decision: Working on a ship to find a way to France, to the West, where there was an outstanding level of development and also the land of those who were ruling Vietnam. As Prime Minister Pham Van Dong once wrote: “Ho Chi Minh’s career started at this point. The great destiny of the country and the people is closely linked with a decision that history has proven to be wise and extraordinary”⁽²⁾.

Nguyen Tat Thanh’s departure abroad was not to “request for help” but to find a way to escape the enslavement of Western colonialism. He understood that what Vietnam needed was not a gun but a revolutionary method, so he really wanted to see how the “mother country” was, how other countries were “organized and ruled”, how their operation mechanism worked, and then return to help the Vietnamese people. Nguyen Tat Thanh revealed an extraordinary personality: A departure for a noble ideal and the will to discover new things and its true nature. The intuition of a genius told him: To find a new way, you must go to a new horizon and have a new mindset. Finding a way for an individual is difficult, finding a way for the whole nation is even more difficult and important because it is associated with the matter of life and death of a nation. So, were the belongings that the young man carried commensurate with the great mission that he voluntarily shouldered?

As a representative of Vietnamese culture, Nguyen Tat Thanh’s greatest belongings are patriotism, love for the people and the will to fight the colonialists. Since long ago, special living conditions have made patriotism the mainstream in Vietnamese culture and the highest moral standard of Vietnamese people. As historian Trần Văn Giàu wrote, “if you use the word ‘the way’ with its original meaning as ‘direction’, then genuine patriotism is truly the Vietnamese way”⁽³⁾.

Nguyen Tat Thanh was born into a Confucian family, but he was not educated according to the concept of “loyal to the king, love for the country”. Instead, he was educated according to the progressive view of “Love for the country means love for the people”; therefore, his greatest purpose upon his departure was to save his people from slavery. Patriotism and love for the people are the motivation for Nguyen Tat Thanh to “engage” in the extremely arduous journey of saving the country. He once affirmed: “In the beginning, it was patriotism, not communism, which led me to believe in Lenin and in the Third International”⁽⁴⁾. Later, he confided to the young generation that: “Feeling heartbroken because of our slave nation, I went to many foreign countries, did many jobs to live in order to find the way to the revolution”⁽⁵⁾. On the other hand, his deep patriotism and love for the people were also a condition for him to become the nation’s leader as Prime Minister Pham Van Dong said: “The person whom the whole nation respects as their old father must have a heart immersed with everlasting compassion that touched the hearts of all the people”⁽⁶⁾.



The conference to unite communist organizations and establish the Communist Party of Vietnam was held in Hong Kong (China) in 1930 under the chairmanship of Comrade Nguyen Ai Quoc on behalf of the Communist International _Photo: VNA

Saving a nation is an enormous issue, so of course, revolutionaries must have a lot of knowledge, especially political knowledge. However, Nguyen Tat Thanh's knowledge was limited at first. Later, he shared with Vietnamese youth that "When I was over 25 years old, I still didn't know what the Party or the Union was. It took me some time to figure it out"⁽⁷⁾. However, there was an extremely useful "compass" for him to choose the way: Truth is what benefits the people; any organization or theory that benefits the majority of the people and the colonial peoples should be a good organization and correct theory. To go to France and the West, one must be good at French and English, but at this time, his foreign language skills were only minimal. However, he still decided to leave, then life - the largest university, gradually supplemented him with necessary knowledge.

The 21-year-old young man's journey from a closed Eastern country to the large West was not smooth; new things, challenges, and hardships were waiting ahead that only those with special mettle could overcome. Even in Nguyen Tat Thanh's direction, he also exuded an extraordinary will when he headed to the West, not stop in the East like many predecessors. While Phan Chau Trinh went to France under the guarantee of the French Association for Human Rights, Phan Boi Chau and the youths in the Dong Du (Going East) movement went to Japan with the donations of landowners and the bourgeois who had both "heart and wealth" to support them, Nguyen Tat Thanh departed alone and did manual work even though he came from

an intellectual family. His choice for jobs was not simply to earn a living but must provide him the ability to visit places, to learn about life in different countries, to increase knowledge... During the journey to find the truth, he had to live in material deprivation and faced dangerous situations. However, no hardship can break the will of a person whose strong desire was to liberate his homeland.

2. Nguyen Ai Quoc's journey to become a communist

In the process of finding a way to save the country, patriotism and hatred for the enemy were “necessary” but not “sufficient” conditions. The patriot needs to understand the reasons for the failure of the previous movements and clearly see the current trends to choose the most appropriate path and conditions for victory.

While appreciating the enthusiasm and effort of his predecessors in finding a way to save the country, Nguyen Tat Thanh ruled out the model for national liberation of the predecessors. Later, he concluded: “Phan Chau Trinh only asked the French to carry out reform, which was a mistake, since it was no different from asking the enemy for mercy. Phan Boi Chau expected the Japanese to help us expel the French. That was even more dangerous, like getting rid of a tiger at the front door but bringing a leopard at the back door. Hoang Hoa Tham was more realistic because he directly fought against the French, but his way was still heavily feudal style”⁽⁸⁾. With the analytical mind and intuition of a genius, Nguyen Tat Thanh decisively abandoned the old and outdated thinking of his predecessors to find new things and choose the appropriate way to save the country and the people, in line with the development trend of the times.

Going out to the large world, Nguyen Tat Thanh made a long journey to understand the colonial peoples and capitalist society. He visited three largest imperialist countries at that time: France, Great Britain, and the United States. With his keen observation and concern for people in poverty, he was not overwhelmed by the glamor, modernity, and wealth of Western capitalist society, but realized that: Capitalist civilization was built on the principle of “people exploit people”. He wisely recognized the nature of rhetoric about capitalist society and bourgeois revolution to draw his own conclusions: “The French Revolution is like the American Revolution, that is, a halfway revolution, known as being republic and democratic, but in fact, it stripped the workers and peasants domestically while it oppressed the colonies externally”⁽⁹⁾. Although the bourgeois revolution had built a more advanced society than the feudal society, class oppression was not eliminated, it had only been replaced from one form to another and the people and workers still suffered. Moreover, it was the bourgeois revolution that paved the way for the development of capitalism-imperialism - the enemy of the Vietnamese revolution. Therefore, the bourgeois revolution could not be the choice of the Vietnamese people.

The path to finding the truth was brightened when Nguyen Ai Quoc heard about the victory of the Russian October Revolution. Although at that time he had not read

any works of V.I.Lenin, according to “natural feelings”, he felt a wonderful attraction and “a love of solidarity with the Russian revolution and its leader”⁽¹⁰⁾. The victory of the October Revolution and the foundation of the Third International founded by V.I.Lenin had a strong impact on the proletariat and social parties in the world, including the French proletariat. The French Socialist Party - an organization of which Nguyen Ai Quoc was a member, faced a choice: Stay at the Second International or join the Third International? Nguyen Ai Quoc himself must also had a clear political attitude and once again an effective “compass” which was the interests of the nation, came into play. He asked: “Which International defends the peoples of the colonial countries”? He got a clear answer when he read the “First draft of theses on national and colonial questions” by V.I.Lenin printed in L’Humanite newspaper issued by The French Socialist Party on July 16 and 17, 1920. Even the title of the article attracted the attention of Nguyen Ai Quoc because the fate of the colonial peoples had always been his constant concern.

V.I.Lenin’s theses mentioned many contents, but most importantly, it affirmed the right of the nation to self-determination and required the Communist parties in the imperialist countries to help the national liberation movement in the colonies in a positive and practical way. V.I.Lenin also emphasized the necessity to link the national liberation movement in the colony with the workers’ movement in the mother country to fight a common enemy and affirmed that the Third International would help the colonial revolution and the Soviet Union will be the stronghold of the global revolution.

The theses answered Nguyen Ai Quoc’s various questions that he often pondered, such as, which path would liberate the nation, who would be the leader, which force and organization would help the colonial nations in the struggle for independence, how should the relationship between the mother country and the colonies be resolved? Nguyen Ai Quoc found that “Lenin was the first person to understand and fully appreciate the great importance of attracting the people of colonial countries to the revolutionary movement. Lenin was the first to point out that, without the participation of the colonial peoples, a social revolution would not be possible”⁽¹¹⁾. The slogan “Proletarians of the world and oppressed peoples, unite” of the Third International opened a new direction for the proletariat in the mother country and the people of the colonial countries. Therefore, the theses created a fundamental, substantial turning point in the development of Nguyen Ai Quoc’s perception, stance and political thought.

He believed in the Third International and followed the path of the October Revolution. From then on, he passionately read the works of V.I.Lenin as well as documents of the Third International. He was especially interested in 21 conditions for joining the Third International initiated by V.I.Lenin with the aim of promoting the strength of the colonial revolution. At the 18th Congress of the French Socialist Party (December 1920), when it became clear that the Second

International did not mention the fate of the colonies while the Third International was the only international organization committed to supporting the revolution of the colonies, Nguyen Ai Quoc voted to participate in the Third International and became a co-founder of the French Section of the Comintern and the first communist of the Vietnamese nation.

History shows that there were different ways to reach the truth, many ways to become a communist, but Nguyen Ai Quoc became a communist in his own way. He went from patriotism to Marxism - Leninism, brought the light of Marxism - Leninism to illuminate the workers' and patriotic movements in Vietnam.

3. Reasons for success and historical significance

When most of the nations in Asia and Africa were colonies of Western imperialist countries, not only Vietnam, but all oppressed peoples, had a desire to be liberated; patriots of those nations had tried to find a way to save their countries, but not everyone was successful. In the 1920s of the 20th century, there were famous Vietnamese people in Paris who were highly educated with great knowledge and well-versed at French such as Phan Chau Trinh, Phan Van Truong, Nguyen The Truyen, Nguyen An Ninh... However, after all, it was the man who "doesn't know what party and union are, and is not clear how socialism is different from communism"⁽¹²⁾ was able to access the truth of the times. This was neither an accident, nor a "pure luck". It was all thanks to the role of subjective factors, which were the ability and special qualities of Nguyen Ai Quoc.

The path towards the truth was never easy, so first of all, a revolutionary must have strong will and determination. In 30 years of international activities, at all times and in all circumstances, Nguyen Ai Quoc had a clear goal: leaving his country was to return to help his compatriots and no obstacle could change his determination. When he became a communist, he had the opportunity to work in France, the Soviet Union, and China with easier and less dangerous working conditions, but Nguyen Ai Quoc was still determined to return to his mission as a guider, organizer, leader of the Vietnamese revolutionary movement. This was not only the extraordinary energy but also loyalty to his people and country.

Truth only comes to those who have scientific thinking and practical spirit. Although he did not have conditions to study properly at school, Nguyen Ai Quoc showed a special sensitivity to new things. He soon realized the nature of the new age - the transitional era from capitalism

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to socialism which was paved the way by the October Revolution. With a strong understanding of practical principles, he did not believe in rhetoric and superficial manifestations when facing choices, but he always asked a practical question such as which organization or theory cared for the interests of colonial peoples? He soon realized that, in the new era, the national liberation revolution was a part of the world proletarian revolution. Therefore, paying attention to the colony and affirming that the proletariat of the country must support the colonial revolution... was a key meeting point between Nguyen Ai Quoc and Marxist - Leninist theory. Later on, Ho Chi Minh also clarified: "In the current epoch, the national liberation revolution is an integral part of the global proletarian revolution; the national liberation revolution must develop into a socialist revolution to achieve complete victory"⁽¹³⁾.

Diverse practical activities were one of the reasons for Nguyen Ai Quoc's success. He voluntarily "engaged" in the path of hard work not only to make a living but also to understand the life, characteristics, and aspirations of workers around the world. Thanks to that, he learned the truth that "workers from anywhere could be friends" to form a new strategy of "Workers of the world, unite!"⁽¹⁴⁾. Nguyen Ai Quoc's purpose when he left the country was to find a way to save it, so he actively participated in political activities. This was a huge difference between him and the vast majority of Vietnamese in France at that time.

He not only became the "soul" of the Vietnamese patriotic group in France, but also joined the French Socialist Party, actively participated in activities of the Faubourg Club, and actively wrote newspapers to disseminate politics. Through these activities, besides increasing political knowledge and prestige, Nguyen Ai Quoc also learned skills in debating, public speaking, communication, persuasion, organizing mass associations and writing political books... All of these helped him gradually become a professional revolutionary and an outstanding communist soldier. In the lack of both time and material conditions, he always maintained his study activities voluntarily, regularly and effectively. Thanks to his persistent will and scientific plan, he not only perfected his political and cultural knowledge but also mastered French, English, Russian, and many other languages to serve his revolution activities.

It can be affirmed that the meeting between Vietnamese patriotism and Marxism - Leninism was not entirely coincidental or lucky, but was a corresponding consensus and mutual cooperation in the aspiration to liberate the country of Nguyen Ai Quoc and Marxism - Leninism. It was also an inevitable result of Nguyen Ai Quoc's own preeminent personal qualities and practical experience.

Nguyen Ai Quoc - Ho Chi Minh was a man of history, his decisions and turning points created milestones in the Vietnamese and the world revolution. Although Marxism-Leninism highly appreciates the role of the revolutionary masses, it never denies the role of great men, but on the contrary, contributes to its scientific explanation. Specifically, it was the national and epochal meaning of the event that

Nguyen Ai Quoc became a communist.

Before voting to become the first communist of the Vietnamese nation, Nguyen Ai Quoc was well aware that to save the country and liberate the nation, there was no other way but the path of the proletarian revolution and “If Annam wants the revolution to succeed, it must rely on the Third International”⁽¹⁵⁾. The fact that Nguyen Ai Quoc became a communist ended the crisis in finding a way to save the country and the leading class of the Vietnamese people for more than half a century.

Believing and following Marxism - Leninism, Nguyen Ai Quoc learned from that theory about the Communist Party with the famous truth that “to have a revolutionary movement, there must be a revolutionary party”. Therefore, it was he who prepared the conditions for the establishment of the Communist Party of Vietnam in 1930.

Following communism, Nguyen Ai Quoc paved a new direction for the country's development. Since then, national independence would be associated with socialism, national liberation associated with class liberation to reach the ultimate goal of human emancipation. Thus, in 1911, Nguyen Tat Thanh left the country as a “pathfinder”, then by 1920, Nguyen Ai Quoc had become the one who “led the way” of the Vietnamese nation. A new era of the nation named after Ho Chi Minh has opened ■

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● Endnotes:

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