

# China: The centenary of the Chinese Communist Party (2)

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In the aftermath of Chiang's March 20 coup, the leadership of the CCP hesitated to take any action, waiting for a response from Moscow to this hostile act from the GMD leader most closely courted by the CI. Internally, however, Chen Duxiu and the Central Committee, opted for proposing an alliance with the "Left GMD" of Wang Jingwei, now based in Wuhan, and a strengthening of the CCP-led armed units of the National Revolutionary Army, NRA.

Within weeks of the coup, having consolidated his grip on Guangzhou, Chiang ordered restrictions on the activity of communists within the GMD: they were no longer permitted to head up departments of the party, could have no more than one-third of places on committees, were not allowed to criticise the works of Sun Yatsen, could not arm units and had to hand over the names of all CCP members.

Chen now called for the CCP to leave the GMD and to conduct the alliance, still seen as strategically necessary, as an independent party. However, having now received his orders from Moscow, the CI representative, Borodin, insisted that this would be an over-reaction. Following Stalin's advice, he persuaded the Central Committee that, in the interest of unity and the strategic imperative of the alliance, they should accept Chiang's orders as merely a clarification of responsibilities, pointing out that he had also taken action against some leading rightists.

In the autumn of 1926, Chiang began the mobilisation for the Northern Expedition, the three-pronged advance of the NRA whose first objective was to defeat the warlords who controlled provinces south of the Yangzi River. Now, everything was focused on this and the CCP threw itself into supporting the advance by mobilising workers and peasants into unions and associations. In Hunan, for example, 500,000 were enrolled into the peasant organisations, many of which provided vital intelligence and support to the Army. Similarly, in the towns and cities, new trades unions were formed, leading strikes not only over wages and conditions but also for political rights and against the warlords' imperialist backers.

It was against this background of rapid military advances that the CI decided to accept the GMD into its ranks as a "sympathising section", underlining the belief that the long-standing strategy of the alliance with it was now paying off. Yet, on the ground, all was not well. In districts directly under the control of Chiang's troops, there were reports of the newly formed unions being closed down and actions taken against peasants occupying lands.

Shanghai

On March 21, 1927, after two failed attempts, the CCP-led unions of Shanghai, numbering in all 800,000 workers, successfully seized control of China's biggest city, expelled the warlord who had controlled it with the aid of the foreign powers and established a provisional government. In keeping with party policy,

several representatives of business were included in this body, and it agreed not to enter the International Settlement, for fear of provoking an imperialist counterattack.

Given the experience in Canton just a year earlier, the members of the Central Committee present in Shanghai recognised the likelihood of repression at the hands of Chiang, whose army was fast approaching the city. They proposed preparing for an armed offensive but also to enlist the support of the Left GMD in Wuhan. Before their proposal was even received in Wuhan, Chiang struck.

In a concerted attack involving not only his own troops but police, foreign security units and the Triads, China's mafia, a pogrom was unleashed against the working class districts on April 12, 1927. Thousands were killed over days of fighting and all union and party offices were ransacked.

Even this disaster did not produce a fundamental change of line by the CI. In response to the massacre, Wang Jingwei and the left GMD Wuhan government expelled Chiang. The CI representative, MN Roy, interpreted this as the purging of the rightists, leaving the Left GMD as the national revolutionary leadership. This echoed the line taken in Moscow by Stalin who declared that the GMD would now go on to become the organ of the "revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry". Accordingly, on June 30, the CCP called on the workers and peasants of China to accept the leadership of the Wuhan government and GMD.

Trotsky, by contrast, who had already called for an independent party in March, now concluded that the Chinese revolution would succeed in a soviet form, or it would not succeed at all.

Despite the endorsement of the international leadership of the CI, Wang Jingwei actually opted to seek an alliance with Chiang. On July 15, he ordered the expulsion of all communists from the GMD. The entire CCP strategy had collapsed, Chen Duxiu accepted responsibility and resigned as its General Secretary.

Stalin's response to this disaster confirms Trotsky's characterisation of his politics at this time, "bureaucratic centrism", that is, in the absence of a scientifically grounded programme, a capacity to swing from one extreme to the other, from opportunism to sectarianism, for example, under the impact of events. Stalin concluded that the expulsion of the CCP proved that the class struggle had now reached a qualitatively higher level, so high as to justify a military and political offensive.

### Autumn Harvest Uprising

Over the next three months, a series of cities and rural areas were seized by CCP-led troops and the party's armed units. The first, in Nanchang, lasted three days before regular GMD troops attacked and forced a small group of survivors to flee to the mountains of Jing Gang Shan. In the "Autumn Harvest Uprising" in Hunan, a force of 3,000 took over several provincial towns but, here too, they proved no match for regular troops and once again small groups, including Mao Zedong, could only escape to the mountains. The "Hailufeng Soviet" differed in that it was primarily a peasant movement that seized lands, mobilising some 300,000, but it was unable to link up with any urban forces and was soon routed with great loss of life by the GMD troops.

The final act in this ill-conceived and desperate strategy was the Guangzhou Commune in December 1927. This drew on the organisations and cadres formed at the time of the Hong Kong general strike but was only able to hold out for three days. The GMD report on its suppression counted 5,700 dead. That figure alone is dreadful enough but does not convey the full extent of the defeat for the whole Chinese working class that these "insurrections" brought. Not only were many, perhaps most, of the experienced political and trade union cadres killed and their organisations disbanded but any trust that the general

working class population might still have had in the Communist Party, indeed, in any political organisation, was completely destroyed.

The defeats in China coincided with, and contributed to, deep divisions within the CI and the Soviet party leaderships. In brief, the swing from opportunism to ultra-leftism that was seen in China was also imposed on the soviet party and the whole of the International. The "general line" of this Third Period was that capitalism was entering into a period of crisis in which it was necessary for communist parties to prepare for revolutionary situations and to avoid all relations with other parties, which were guaranteed to side with capital.

The evidence for this scenario in China was the inability of Chiang Kai-shek to subordinate the various warlords who continued to thwart both his attempts to unite the country under his rule and to finally eliminate the "soviet base areas" established by groups of communists in various remote and mountainous regions.

The principal proponent of the CI's line in China was to be Li Lisan. He was appointed head of the propaganda department after the sixth party congress, which met in Moscow for security reasons and did not include leaders from the "soviet bases". Li's overall strategy, derived from the CI's perspective of rising class struggle, was for the regroupment of the party's scattered forces in preparation for a renewed offensive that would return the party to the cities. In this scenario, there would be no alliances with other forces, no concessions to the petit bourgeoisie, including in the rural areas.

For entirely pragmatic reasons, Mao and other leaders rejected every element of this "Li Lisan Line" which they thought misjudged not only the military situation but also the potential for alliances with the "middle classes", both urban and rural. In the base areas, for example, although they enforced a quite radical land redistribution and abolished rents, they only confiscated the landlords' lands, not those of the "middle peasants".

Despite their misgivings, however, they remained disciplined communists and, when ordered to mobilise to support proposed insurrections in Changsha, Nanchang and Wuhan, they obeyed orders. The outcome of these military adventures was again disastrous. Changsha was occupied for ten days but Chiang's troops then retook the city - and slaughtered all the remaining communists who had remained underground to prepare the "rising". The collapse in Changsha convinced Mao and Zhu De that their proposed attack on Nanchang should be abandoned and, together with He Long's forces, originally assigned to Wuhan, they returned to their "base area".

## Li Lisan

The Changsha debacle proved to be a turning point in the development of the programme of the CCP. Although Li Lisan was deposed, the official leadership of the party, strengthened by the return of students from Moscow, led by Wang Ming, remained tied to the CI's analysis. Based in Shanghai, however, it was forced into an underground existence while in the Jiangxi Soviet, to which Mao and his forces had transferred from Jing Gang Shan, a new, de facto, leadership was emerging with a quite different political programme.

This essentially rejected the ultra-left opposition to alliances and returned to the perspective of a national democratic revolution that would require allies from the "national bourgeoisie" as well as the urban and rural petit bourgeois. A formal loyalty to Marxist orthodoxy was maintained by the insistence that the leading role would be played by the proletariat but, in reality, this party had no contact at all with the cities or the working class - and would have none for most of the next twenty years.

The real content of the formula was that the Communist Party would play the leading role. Here we see a parallel with Trotsky's penetrating insight when he explained the mistake that had allowed originally dedicated Bolshevik revolutionaries to commit the most awful crimes against the working class: "They thought THEY were the revolution". Similarly, Mao and his comrades came to believe that THEY, in the form of the party, were the revolution. This justified any tactics or manoeuvres in the struggle to maintain their power.

This allowed them not only to abandon the party's official perspectives but also its priority of urban organisation. From now on, taking power in the cities would require first taking power in the countryside. This strategy, however, together with the programme that justified it and the tactics with which it was to be implemented, was not adopted as the official line of the party until the final defeat of the Soviet-backed leadership at the Zunyi Conference of January 1935. By this time, organisational techniques and political procedures initially adopted in order to ensure survival had hardened into a systematic political practice.

At no point in the evolution or consolidation of "Maoism" was there ever any recognition of, or programme for, the building of democratically controlled workers' organisations that would both lead the struggle against capitalism and form the basis of the future revolutionary workers' state. Indeed, apart from a recognition of the existence of classes and class interests within society, and of imperialism as a world system, Marxism, understood as an analysis of capitalism and a programme for its international overthrow and replacement by an internationally planned economy under the control of workers' councils, played no operative role in Maoism whose programme represented a fusion of Stalinism and revolutionary Chinese nationalism.

## Popular Front

Internationally, the rise of Nazi Germany led to the rejection by the Communist International of the ultraleft politics of the Third Period. In its place, Stalin adopted the Popular Front strategy, that is, a policy of seeking alliances with bourgeois forces on the basis of policies which did not conflict with their interests. For Mao, this policy effectively endorsed his own. Thus, his adoption of the popular front in the form of the "Second United Front" with the Guomindang in the war against Japan is not evidence of slavish subordination to Moscow but rather a coincidental alignment of Mao's preferred strategy with that of Stalin.

With the outbreak of full-scale war in 1937, Mao, while maintaining his own geographical base in Yenan, nonetheless subordinated his forces to the overall command of Chiang Kai-shek. While this took the form of the "anti-imperialist united front" tactic developed by the CI in its revolutionary period, its content differed in that, far from warning the working class and peasantry of China of the inevitable inadequacy of Chiang's leadership, Mao praised him to the skies. There is no reason to believe this was naivete rather than cynical calculation or that Mao did not always expect treachery from Chiang and intended to turn against him when the time was right, the error was the failure to warn the working class and peasantry of the need to develop their own fighting forces. The combination of Mao's reliance on guerrilla warfare and the political strategy of the People's Front produced the concept of the "People's War" which was to become a key component of "Maoism".

The block of four classes was not limited to the war against Japan, but also extended to the proposed governmental programme of the "new democracy" - the Maoist equivalent of the "capitalist" stage of development presented as necessary before socialist revolution in the Stalinist "stages" schema. No timescale for the duration of this ?stage? was ever defined but it should be noted that the model for the ?socialism? that was to follow was provided by the Soviet Union. After the defeat of Japan, Mao maintained his call for a popular front government. When Chiang's treachery created splits in the GMD, Mao hailed those who broke away from Chiang as the "national bourgeoisie". This paved the way to a

coalition government with these dissident elements of the GMD on a programme of capitalist development after the "Liberation" of 1949, that is, a Popular Front government.

## Conclusion

To characterise the years up to 1949 simply as the period of "New Democracy" obscures both the dramatic events of those years and the consequences they had for the character of the CCP when it finally came to power. The relationship between the fledgling party of the early Twenties and the fast changing policies of the Communist International resulted not just in a defeat but in the physical annihilation of most of the party's cadres and its working class supporters.

The party that finally established itself in Yanan and set about building the political and military apparatus that would eventually bring it to power, was qualitatively different from the party that, under the misleadership of the Communist International, fought, and lost, the Second Revolution of 1925 -27.

Even before the final defeat of Chiang Kai-shek, the CCP was already the party of a military-bureaucratic caste. Although its social base lay outside the cities, both its Popular Front programme and its organisational structures could easily assimilate elements of the existing bourgeois state machine. By contrast, it had almost no contacts or roots in the urban working class.

The subsequent history of the party, and of China, we have dealt with elsewhere. On the centenary of the foundation of that party, the starting point for the building of a new party of the working class, committed not to Great Power status but to international revolution, is the recognition that the "Chinese Communist Party" is now the governing apparatus of an imperialist power.

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