

becoming the saviours of the empire, many of these students instead took the lead in looking to the non-Chinese world for solutions to China's ills. Indeed, it was Chinese students in Japan who established the Chinese Revolutionary Alliance in 1905 under the leadership of Sun Yatsen – the first national political organisation committed to overthrowing the empire. As these students sent books and texts back to their friends in China, and then returned to take up positions within the imperial bureaucracies and armies, a revolutionary movement began to take shape within China.

Imperial rule continued until 1912, but with the imperial court consumed by its own factional in-fighting, the political vacuum in Beijing all but necessitated local leaders taking more and more power onto themselves. When they lobbied for a greater say in national politics with the creation of a new national assembly, they were frustrated by proposals that would have packed the assembly with the kinsmen of the courtisans, essentially maintaining a veto for the central imperial court.

These frustrations came to a head in October 1911 when troops in Wuhan in central China rebelled, fearing that an investigation into an accidental bomb explosion would reveal the extent of support for the Revolutionary Alliance within their ranks. Wuhan fell in just three days, and its declaration of independence from the empire was swiftly followed by similar declarations from other provinces as the revolution proceeded more by provincial decrees than by violence. The final straw for the empire came when Yuan Shikai took his troops south to defeat the rebels in Wuhan. Rather than engaging in conflict, Yuan engaged in discussions, and having secured the promise that he would become President of the new republic, the military joined the revolution and the empire's fate was sealed.

On 12 February 1912 the last Emperor, Puyi, formally abdicated, but rather than marking the end of uncertainty and turmoil in Chinese government, it merely marked the start of a new period of uncertainty. The Revolutionary Alliance reformed itself as the Nationalist Party – the Guomindang – to fight China's first (and to date only) national parliamentary elections. Although they won the vote, the new President Yuan Shikai simply declared the elections invalid and attempted to reconstitute power around himself. Indeed, in November 1915 Yuan went as far as restoring the empire and, unsurprisingly, choosing himself as the new Emperor. By this stage, however,

the new regime had lost the support of those same local leaders who had brought it into existence, and by the time that Yuan died in June 1916 China had no effective national leadership as different groups claimed national leadership from different power centres (the Guomindang in Canton, the residual supporters of Yuan Shikai in Tianjin, and Li Yuanhong as Republican President in Nanjing).

### MAO'S EARLY POLITICAL INFLUENCES AND ACTIONS

Mao's early acts of defiance against his family are more understandable when viewed in light of this political environment. He was born into an environment in which all the old certainties were being questioned, and increasingly being rejected. It was a time when all Chinese were being forced to think about the basic principles that had underpinned the Chinese state and society for centuries, and Mao was far from alone in thinking that things had to change, and change radically.

But like many of his generation, Mao did not reject everything from China's past. The national humiliation of defeat in the Opium Wars and in other subsequent conflicts left deep and long-lasting scars on the entire nation. Mao and many of his generation felt that China had been betrayed by its leaders, who had failed to respond to the new challenges provided by the arrival of the western powers. Whilst they rejected the policies and many of the principles of China's Confucian leaders, they were inspired by the goal of restoring China to its past glory and position of pre-eminence in the world. It was not that they accepted the supremacy of the west *per se*, but that China had to learn from the west's temporary dominance, and use elements of western thinking and practice to put China back where it belonged.

A strong nationalist sentiment became one of the key features of Mao's political thought. If there is one constant element that stayed with Mao throughout his entire political life, it was the desire to see China returned to its rightful place as a powerful nation. Mao's belief that China should not have to kowtow to anybody became manifest in a brand of Marxism that had deep roots in Chinese nationalism – in many ways a form of national socialism that was often far removed from the teachings of Marx and Engels.

It is important to reiterate that Mao was not alone in rejecting elements of the past and looking outside China for new solutions. But it is also important to recognise that this was by no means a mass movement. Those young Chinese searching for new foreign solutions were predominantly young men in the towns and cities who were able to gain more than a rudimentary education. Thanks to the wealth of his family, Mao was one of these young men, attending the normal school in Changsha,<sup>13</sup> the provincial capital of his native Hunan province, at the time of the 1911 revolution. Here, Mao read more about recent Chinese history, and first came into contact with the new ideas flooding into China at the time, usually via those Chinese students in Japan.

At this stage, liberalism and not Marxism attracted most attention from young Chinese.<sup>14</sup> This was partly due to the political messages that liberalism carried. In particular, the French Revolution was taken as a shining example of how to construct a new state-system after the overthrow of an entrenched royal family. But if anything, the social implications of liberalism had more resonance for the young Chinese of the time. Although Mao himself interrupted his studies for six months to serve in the revolutionary army in Changsha, he was initially more concerned with social rather than political revolution. In addition to reading translations of western liberal thinkers such as Montaigne, Carlyle and Mill, and the newsletters of the Revolutionary Alliance, Mao and his contemporaries became fascinated by the lessons that could be found in western literature. Of all the foreign books being read in China at the time, few had more of an impact than Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. This story of a woman who refused to accept the oppression and tyranny of the traditional family structure, and instead took her future in her own hands, deeply impressed Mao and many others. Indeed, much of Mao's earliest writing echoed Ibsen's sentiments, dealing with the role of women in society and attacking the traditional Confucian family structure.

Mao became involved with what we now call the May Fourth or New Culture Movement by contributing to *New Youth*, the magazine that was at the vanguard of distributing these new ideas. The May Fourth Movement was a movement by a small group of young urban intellectuals for young urban intellectuals. Its impact beyond the confines of this small group was strictly limited. But for people like Mao, it was the spark that

politicised a generation into political activity,<sup>15</sup> and helped formulate and shape the ideas of many of China's later generation of political leaders.

#### FROM MAY FOURTH TO MARXISM

The May Fourth period was an important turning point in China's history. It is named after the mass demonstration that occurred in Tiananmen Square in Beijing on 4 May 1919, but is now used to refer to an indeterminate period before and after the demonstration in which young urban educated Chinese became increasingly interested in western ideas. By 1919, any hope that the 1911 revolution had marked the start of a new beginning for China had disappeared. The new republican system had collapsed into armed conflict between different groups, and even within the groups themselves. Within this power vacuum, strong regional leaders assumed more and more control, leading to the *de facto* division of China into different spheres of influence dominated by military might.

The demonstration of 4 May was a direct response to China's treatment at the hands of the great powers at the end of the First World War. Thousands of Chinese had fought with the allies during the war and many others had worked in armaments factories in France. And if this was not enough to gain a reward from the allies, Woodrow Wilson's stated principle of allowing self-determination for all peoples seemed to imply that the western powers would hand back to China all those territories that had been taken as a result of China's military defeats from the Opium Wars onwards. In the event, German control of land in Shandong province in north China was revoked, but rather than returning it to China, the land was instead transferred to Japanese control.

For those Chinese searching for a new model for Chinese society, the failure of the western nations to treat China fairly undermined the validity of the western liberal approach. Although the Bolshevik revolution in the Soviet Union provided a concrete example of how a nation could reassert itself in the face of foreign imperialism and arrogance, Marxism was far from the only new idea that provided an alternative to both the traditional Chinese view and the western liberal view. The anarchist ideas of Bakunin and Kropotkin were much more

popular than Marxism in the first decade of the twentieth century. Indeed, Dirlik refers to anarchism as the 'midwife' to Marxism, in that many of those who formed and joined the Communist Party in the 1920s became interested in revolutionary politics by reading about anarchism in the first instance.<sup>16</sup>

Mao's own introduction to Marxism appears to have occurred during his time in Beijing and Shanghai in 1918-20. On arriving in Beijing in 1918, Mao found a job as an assistant librarian at Beijing University<sup>17</sup> under the head librarian, Li Dazhao. Inspired by the October revolution, Li was one of the first men to embrace Marxism, and established a study group in Beijing to discuss its applicability to China. Crucially, Li argued that the sheer size of the Chinese peasantry meant that any successful revolutionary movement must contain revolutionary activity by the peasantry, and not just rely on the urban proletariat. It is notable that Mao's own brand of Marxism was also built on an understanding of the revolutionary potential of the peasantry.

Although Mao was inducted into the Chinese Communist Party at its inception in Shanghai in 1921, his Marxist credentials at the time were (and some would argue remained) somewhat weak. While he had read some of the works of Marx and Engels, his political ideas were shaped more by his first-hand experiences and analyses of what was wrong with China than by any abstract theoretical works. In this respect, Mao's views of revolution and Chinese Marxism were very much in the minority at this time. Unlike Mao, most other party members were heavily influenced by Marxist ideology, and particularly by Leninist interpretations of revolution. The influence of the Communist International (Comintern) was particularly important here. Charged with exporting revolutionary ideas, Comintern agents like Voitinsky, Maring and Otto Braun played an important role in educating and organising Marxists within China. Promising students were also taken to Moscow for training in ideological and organisational affairs at the Sun Yatsen University. On their return to China these 'returned students' (also known as the 28 Bolsheviks) remained very close to their Comintern masters, and were fierce proponents of the Leninist view.

In addition to these Moscow-trained communists, a small but significant number of Chinese communists travelled to Europe on work-study programmes. For example, Zhou Enlai, China's Premier after the revolution, went to France in 1920, where he organised Marxist discussion groups and political

cells amongst Chinese workers which were then incorporated into the French Communist Party. The youngest member of the group accompanying Zhou Enlai and a prominent political activist in Lyon was a young man from Sichuan province called Deng Xiaoping - the man who led China away from Maoism and towards economic reform after 1978.<sup>18</sup>

Mao's main area of disagreement with these Comintern-influenced communists was over which groups in society represented the true revolutionary force. The Comintern 'orthodoxy' was that when the revolution occurred, it would be through the actions of the urban working class. Although the urban proletariat numbered less than 2 per cent of the total population, the party should nevertheless concentrate on promoting trade union activism and building an urban movement. Mao, however, like Li Dazhao before him, felt that this emphasis on building an urban revolutionary movement ignored the reality of Chinese circumstances. Not only were the peasantry by far the biggest class numerically, but there was also deep suffering and discontent in the countryside that could, if correctly handled, be transformed into revolutionary activity.

With the CCP dominated by pro-Comintern members, Mao's ideas remained very much in the minority. And despite his growing interest in the peasantry, Mao himself played an important role in developing an urban-based movement in the 1920s. This was partly because Mao was firmly committed to building an urban party *alongside* the politicisation of the peasantry, but it was also because Mao accepted party discipline. Thus, one of his earliest party duties was to organise trade union activities in Hunan and western Jiangxi provinces, a task he performed with his customary zeal. Similarly, although Mao appears to have opposed alliance with the Guomindang, he expended enormous energy working within the Guomindang power structure once the decision was made in 1923.

#### THE COMINTERN, THE GUOMINDANG AND THE CCP

The Guomindang-CCP alliance of 1923-27 was an uneasy marriage from the beginning, and owed more to the Comintern's vision of China's future than it did to a desire to collaborate from the Chinese partners. Whilst doing much to help establish the CCP, the Comintern did not expect an imminent

communist revolution in China. The development of the communist movement was part of a longer-term strategy for China; in the short run Moscow placed its emphasis on promoting the Guomindang as the next government of a unified China.

When the new republic collapsed into turmoil with Yuan Shikai's annulment of the 1911-12 elections, Sun Yatsen and the Guomindang established their own rival provisional government in Guangdong. From 1913 to his death in 1925, Sun spent the remainder of his life coping with the fragmentation of the party into bitter factional conflict. Nevertheless, a Guomindang that was responsive to the Comintern's wishes remained the best option for the Soviets keen to see friendly regimes on the other side of their enormous Asian borders.

Although initially sceptical of the alliance, Mao's period working within the Guomindang stood him in good stead in later years. After a brief period in the propaganda department, Mao became head of the Peasant Training Centre. In one of the great ironies of the Chinese revolution, the Guomindang provided Mao with the opportunity to develop a revolutionary strategy that was ultimately to contribute to their defeat at the hands of Mao's communists. In his formal report on his research, 'On an Investigation into the Peasant Movement in Hunan', Mao reiterated his belief that the peasantry was a potential revolutionary force. And perhaps for the first time, we see Mao advocating a specific policy – the redistribution of land – which he believed could harness this revolutionary potential.

Despite his research in and on Hunan, Mao's colleagues remained unconvinced, and rejected his proposals to promote rural land reform at the 5th Party Congress held in Wuhan during April and May 1927. Mao was heavily criticised at this time by Comintern agents working in China, and by a number of top party figures. For example, Chen Duxiu, the man who established the first communist cells in China, is said to have opposed even discussing Mao's plans in 1927. Qu Qiubai, a trade union activist from Shanghai, also opposed Mao on the grounds that the revolution lay in the hands of the workers alone. So too did Li Lisan, who had been trained in labour organisation in Lyon and Moscow; Luo Zhanglong, a founder member of the party, and a man whom Mao claimed to have personally recruited into the party; and Wang Ming, the man

who spent the period of the Long March claiming to be the CCP leader whilst safely ensconced in Moscow. Mao did not forget the way he was treated and the party formally vilified all of these men after 1949 for supporting the erroneous Moscow line against Mao.

The wisdom of the emphasis on building an urban-based revolution was put to a premature test in 1927 when the Guomindang-CCP alliance collapsed into outright hostility. With Sun Yatsen's death in 1925, the Guomindang entered a phase of further factional infighting in the search to find a successor. The man who emerged victorious was Chiang Kai-shek,<sup>19</sup> who had originally joined Sun Yatsen's Revolutionary Alliance whilst studying in Japan. However, on his return to China in 1910, Chiang spent a number of years on the fringes of the Shanghai underworld, and many in the party were intensely wary of his close connections with a number of secret societies operating on the fringes of Chinese society. Indeed, two of the Guomindang's most powerful leaders, Hu Hanming and Wang Jingwei, refused to accept Chiang's leadership, and established their own rival power bases.<sup>20</sup>

Chiang's rise to power owed much to the fact that he had won the patronage of Sun Yatsen whilst serving in the Guomindang armed forces in Canton in the early 1920s. Chiang was sent for military training in the Soviet Union in 1923, returning to lead the important Whampoa military academy where he became the most powerful military force within the party and surrounded himself with a clique of Whampoa graduates. Despite (or perhaps because of) his close connections and political debt to Moscow, Chiang was sceptical about the alliance with the CCP. And once the political environment proved favourable, Chiang moved to bring the alliance to an abrupt end.

With support from Moscow, the new Guomindang armies under Chiang's leadership embarked on the Northern Expedition, a campaign aimed at reunifying China through military might. Chiang established a new national government first in Wuhan and then Nanjing in 1927. However, rather than defeating the warlord armies in battle, the Guomindang rather unified the country by entering into alliance with the key warlords whereby the warlords retained their local power in return for accepting the national authority of the Guomindang. What this meant in practice was that when the Guomindang

established a new national capital in Nanjing in 1927, they only had effective direct control over the surrounding two or three provinces.

Despite of (or perhaps because of) his relationship with Moscow, Chiang was intensely suspicious of the long-term wisdom of allowing the communists to flourish within the Guomindang party organisation. With his position as national leader underpinned by his new-found alliance with the allied warlords, he no longer needed to retain his old alliance with the communists, and in 1927 acted to rid the party of not only CCP members but also left-leaning Guomindang members. Faced with an apparent threat to its very existence, and spurred on by Comintern agents, the CCP instigated an urban uprising in Nanchang in August 1927 in an attempt to jump-start the proletarian revolution. The uprising was an abject failure, but in the retreat Mao was impressed by what he perceived to be a more revolutionary attitude displayed by the peasantry than by the urban population. Taking affairs largely into his own hands, Mao planned an attack on Changsha in what became known as the Autumn Harvest Uprising. The uprising was nearly aborted when Guomindang troops arrested Mao and prepared to execute him. Miraculously, Mao escaped and hid in grass while a detailed search failed to find him. A cynic might conclude that the bribe that Mao said the guards refused to accept did, in fact, find its way into the captors' hands.

Convinced that the countryside was on the verge of revolution, Mao co-opted local coal-miners into an attempt to harness the revolutionary potential of the peasantry. Not for the last time in his political career, Mao had overestimated the revolutionary stirrings of the peasantry, and when the rebellion failed to materialise, the rebels turned tail and fled. Mao was subsequently criticised by the party for embarking on an unplanned rebellion that was more a military campaign than a proper political campaign based on an objective understanding of local conditions. Mao was suspended from the Politburo, and according to him, even dismissed from the party. More pressing than this official censure, Mao and the remnant of his forces faced capture by the Guomindang, and fled to the Jinggangshan in the relatively remote, barren, but safe mountains of western Jiangxi province. But out of this defeat came the seeds of later victory.

## THE JIANGXI SOVIET

Mao's small group of rebels were slowly but surely swelled by the arrival of communists escaping from similar botched urban rebellions in Nanchang and Canton. Crucially, Mao's forces were to be joined at Jinggangshan by those led by Zhu De in April or May 1928, retreating from the south. The combination of the political ideologue, Mao Zedong, with the military commander, Zhu De, was to become a potent and ultimately successful force. Indeed, Wilson goes as far as to argue that 'if this union had not come off, Mao would have remained at best a discredited provincial leader'.<sup>21</sup> These forces were to be further enhanced in the autumn with the arrival of a small force led by Peng Dehuai. This event was not that significant in itself, but does tell us something about Mao's loyalty to his comrades, and his commitment to his own ideological convictions. Peng stood alongside Mao for much of the rest of the period of the revolutionary struggle. He was a key military commander before 1949, and after the revolution he was charged with overseeing China's involvement in the Korean War. Yet when he crossed Mao in 1959, when he criticised Mao's Great Leap Forward and called for stronger ties with the Soviet Union, Mao did not hesitate to dismiss and vilify Peng.

It was at Jiangxi that Mao began to turn his notions of revolution into a concrete revolutionary strategy. Stuck in the mountains of Jiangxi, Zhu De, Tan Zhenlin (the party leader) and Mao built their capital at Ruijin. They initially had only around 10,000 men, and perhaps as few as 2,000 rifles between them. While Mao was already confident of the revolutionary credentials of the peasantry, this on its own was not sufficient to win the revolution. A spontaneous uprising to overthrow the twin evils of feudalism and colonial exploitation would not happen overnight. Indeed, in order to save the party in the short run, it needed to build a strong politicised army. The revolutionary victory, then, would be a result of military conquest.

At the Kutian Conference of December 1929 – January 1930, Mao took control of the Red Army. He developed four key ideas and policies during this time – ideas and policies that were ultimately to go a very long way to bringing the communists to power. The first was the importance of political indoctrination

within the Red Army to form a cohesive unit. The loyalty of the army must be to ideas, not just to their leader, as Mao thought was the case within the Guomindang forces. Through political indoctrination, the troops' commitment to the fight would be underpinned by their commitment to the cause.

The second idea was to create unity between the people and the party: to spend time talking to the people to find out what their interests and ideas really were and to turn these ideas into practical policies that the people would accept and embrace. Whereas the Guomindang was aloof from society and never really tried to build a mass base of support, Mao saw the CCP's survival and ultimate victory as being predicated in the will of the people. In many ways, this approach not only distanced the CCP from the Guomindang, but also distanced Mao from those in the party who remained faithful to Moscow's revolutionary prescriptions. The party must not place its faith in ideas and policies designed in Moscow, or even designed by an elite group of professional revolutionaries who thought that they knew best. The party must place its faith in the ideas and wishes of the people whom it was supposed to represent.

The third idea, related to this, was to create unity between the army and the people. Again, this idea was based on learning from the mistakes of the Guomindang and presenting the communists as the antithesis of the nationalists. The arrival of armed forces into a village in China was typically the onset of a period of terror. Particularly, but not uniquely, the Guomindang armies had a reputation for brutality, conflict and ill discipline. Mao knew that if the people were to be persuaded not to inform on the communists, and even to join them in their struggle, then the correct conduct of the army was going to be crucial. The army was going to be the communists' first point of contact with most peasants, and their trust and support might not be immediately won, but could easily be immediately lost.

Thus Mao developed the Three Rules and Eight Points of Behaviour to guide the conduct of the army in their relations with the people. These were:

The Three Rules:

- Obey orders in all your actions
- Do not take a single needle or thread from the masses
- Turn in everything captured

The Eight Points of Behaviour:

- Speak politely
- Pay for everything you borrow
- Return everything you damage
- Do not hit or swear at people
- Do not damage crops
- Do not take liberties with women
- Do not ill-treat captives

From the perspective of history, these 11 points may not seem particularly radical (if at all). But it is worth re-emphasising that this was the total antithesis of the approach and attitude of the Guomindang troops. Indeed, it became the source of popular inspiration and support for the party throughout the revolutionary struggle, and helped swell the ranks of the Red Army – not just from the people themselves, but also in large numbers from disaffected Guomindang forces.

The fourth, and last, idea was the development of a mobile warfare strategy. Again, this might not seem radical from the perspective of history, but it was a bold and radical move at the time. Mao recognised that the CCP simply did not have the manpower or the supplies to fight the nationalists in a traditional conflict. The Guomindang, much influenced by the development of the Prussian army, put their faith in static trench warfare – dig in and fight for the land. For Mao, land could be retaken at a later date, men could not be brought back to life. Aided by the mountainous terrain of the Jiangxi Soviet area, Mao argued that it was far better to develop a mobile guerrilla strategy, and if this meant running away to fight another day, then this was much better than standing, fighting and losing. The new military tactics for the Red Army were encapsulated as: when the enemy advances, we retreat; when the enemy camps, we harass; when the enemy tires, we attack; when the enemy retreats, we pursue.

The experiments in building a new revolutionary strategy in Jiangxi were largely very successful. But despite the steps taken by Mao, Tan Zhenlin and Zhu De to build a new approach in Jiangxi, the voice of orthodox Comintern-inspired communism still held sway in the Chinese communist world. For example, while Mao and the others were doing their best to establish a new movement from Jiangxi, the CCP held its 6th Party



Congress in Moscow, with no representatives present from Jiangxi. Under the leadership of Li Lisan, the party reaffirmed its commitment to revolution in the cities, even though only around 3 per cent of party members were now in the cities.

Events came to a head in 1930 when the nationalists organised a period known as the 'White Terror' in the cities to flush out communists and anybody with left-wing sympathies. With their remaining urban movement under threat of extinction, the communists instigated uprisings in Changsha (defeated by gunboats from the US, UK, France and Italy), Nanchang and Wuhai in July 1930. When these uprisings were crushed, the defeated troops fled to the countryside. Worse was to come in January 1931 when the British Settlement Police arrested the remnants of the Shanghai party membership. In April the head of the CCP security organisations, Gu Shunzhang, defected to the Guomindang with a full CCP membership list – and the White Terror really began in earnest.

#### THE COLLAPSE OF THE JIANGXI SOVIET AND THE LONG MARCH

The collapse of the urban-based party might in theory have played into the hands of Mao and the Jiangxi Soviet leadership. Certainly, by the end of 1931, there were around 2–4 million people in the Jiangxi Soviet, including 100,000 troops. Yet in many ways, this created more problems than solutions. As more communist forces made their way to Ruijin, and Guomindang troops defected to the communists (20,000 troops in one go in December 1931), it became increasingly difficult to sustain the soviet with more people to feed but only limited land and resources available.

Furthermore, notwithstanding the failure of the attempts to instigate urban uprisings in 1927 and 1930, many of the proletarian leadership remained welded to their ideas. Indeed, rather than accepting the wisdom of Mao's views, Mao was actually sidelined by the arrival of proletarian communists escaping the fiascos of 1930 and 1931. Power in the Jiangxi Soviet passed into the hands of the newly arrived Comintern agent Otto Braun, and his key supporters, Bo Gu and Zhou Enlai. According to some sources, Mao was actually placed under house arrest by the newly arrived leaders; others suggest that they

tried to encourage Mao to travel to Moscow for 'medical treatment'. Whatever the case, Mao was clearly manoeuvred out of power and had no say in the decision to leave the Jiangxi Soviet and set out on the Long March.

The decision to leave was in many ways forced by the Guomindang. Four previous military campaigns to destroy the Jiangxi Soviet had failed, partly because of the new guerrilla tactics of the Red Army, and partly because of the lack of enthusiasm that many Guomindang military leaders had for the campaign. For the fifth campaign, Chiang Kai-shek himself took personal control, and devoted around 800,000–1,000,000 men, 200–400 planes, and modern German armaments to the campaign. As they encircled the Jiangxi Soviet, bit by bit cutting down the land under communist control, the new Jiangxi Soviet leadership took the decision to shut up shop and leave.

On 16 October 1934 the communists began to abandon Jiangxi in five columns. The nationalists had dug four concentric circles surrounding the Soviet, and in breaking through the trenches the communists lost something like half of their army by December. They were also forced to leave behind most of their equipment, not to mention all the political and economic successes of the previous years. The communists moved out heading west with little clear idea of where they were going, and over the New Year of 1935 they found themselves in Zunyi. At a conference that became a post-mortem on the wisdom of leaving Jiangxi, Zhou Enlai crucially lent his support to Mao and Mao's strategies. Although Mao did not become the formal leader of the Chinese communists at this stage, he was henceforth the *de facto* head of the Chinese communist revolution.

The Long March was in many ways an unmitigated disaster. The troops finally arrived in the relatively safe haven of Wayabao in December 1935, before being forced out to a new soviet at Yanan in northern Shaanxi in September 1936. Of the men under Mao's control in the First Front Army, only around one in 20 made it to Yanan. When He Long arrived with the Second Front Army, only around half of the original troops had survived. The communists had been on the march for 368 days. They had travelled 12,500 kilometres across 11 provinces, crossing 18 mountain ranges and 24 major rivers. And at the end of this, they were left in one of the most desolate areas of China – yet in the space of 13 years they were in power!

But bad as things may have been, the most important fact was that the party had survived. And in the process of surviving, the party and the Red Army had come into face-to-face contact with ordinary Chinese peasants across the country, and in many cases had vastly impressed them. As Mao declared, the Long March had sowed the seeds of the revolution:

it is a manifesto, a propaganda force, a seeding machine

it has proclaimed to the world that the Red Army is an army of heroes

it has announced to some 200 million people in eleven provinces that the road of the Red Army is their only road to liberation.

In many ways, then, the Long March was the communists' recruitment sergeant.

Once in Yanan, the party set about laying the foundations of the strategies that were to epitomise its approach throughout the remaining revolutionary period. Attempts to build the support of the peasantry were conditioned by the desire – in many ways the absolute necessity – of not alienating the existing power-holders. Thus, there was an immediate policy of moderate land reform – no collectivisation of land, or overthrowing the landlords, but a reduction of rents by 25–40 per cent. The party also took steps to include existing power-holders in new forms of organisation and government, whilst at the same time bringing the peasants into power in an alliance of party, peasants and local leaders.

There can be no doubt that the communists were aided in the establishment of the new Yanan Soviet by the growing threat from Japan. Having annexed Manchuria in 1931, the Japanese had steadily spread their influence into northern China, and had met little resistance from the Guomindang on their way. Indeed, student protests against Japanese expansionism had actually been met by force by the Guomindang authorities. Wherever they went, the communists took the opportunity to put forward their own nationalist credentials. Overthrowing colonialism in general, and defeating the Japanese in particular, became the main priority for the party, and in their rhetoric at least, they stood in stark contrast to the apparently capitulationist Guomindang, who had devoted their energies to trying to destroy the communists and ignored the Japanese threat.

In fact, had it not been for the Japanese threat then the communists might not have survived long in Yanan. Having forced the communists into Yanan, Chiang was keen to wipe them out once and for all. However, the warlord armies under the control of Zhang Xueliang (whose own father had been overthrown and killed by the Japanese) refused to attack, arguing that the Japanese were the main threat and they should be dealt with first. Irritated by this challenge to his authority, Chiang Kai-shek flew to nearby Xian to oversee the final defeat of the CCP in December 1936 – where Zhang Xueliang promptly kidnapped him.

Chiang was only released after he agreed to turn the focus of attention to the Japanese and form a united front with all patriotic forces. This event was perhaps the crucial turning point for the CCP. In the first instance, it saved the communists from possible annihilation and gave them a breathing space to establish their policies and ideas in Yanan. In the longer term, the new united front against Japan saw the creation of the Eighth Route Army to resist the Japanese under Lin Biao, He Long and Liu Bocheng paid for and equipped by the nationalists.

Indeed, for Chalmers Johnson, the Japanese invasion was the key to the CCP's victory. In addition to the short-term gains, it gave the communists the opportunity to forge their nationalist credentials, and as noted above, made people of whatever complexion more likely to accede to communist control. Although the revolution was won by the CCP, the 1949 revolution was a victory for nationalism as an ideology and not communism.<sup>22</sup>

There can be no doubt that there is much truth in Johnson's analysis. Mao's brand of Marxism from the beginning was heavily influenced by China's humiliation at the hands of the western powers, and later Japan. The revolution, in Mao's eyes, was as much to liberate China from colonialism as it was to liberate the Chinese people from the shackles of feudalism. It is also true that the communists utilised the nationalists' own apparent failings in defending China's national sovereignty to push their own nationalist credentials. And to this end they were remarkably successful. When the Japanese launched a full-scale invasion in 1937, the nationalists abandoned their capital at Nanjing, moving westwards down the Yangtze, first to Wuhan, and then deep into the south-west of China at Chongqing in Sichuan province.

While the nationalists were relatively safe from direct Japanese aggression in the south-west, Yanan and the communists



were much closer to the front line of Japan's scorched earth policy in northern China. They naturally became the first safe haven for those forced off the land – they were simply closer to the action. But they also became the focus for wider opposition to the Japanese occupation. Particularly after the Americans joined the Pacific War after Pearl Harbor, the nationalists appeared more concerned with building up their power for the resumption of the civil war than they did in beating off the Japanese. If the Americans were going to defeat the Japanese, then why bother losing troops, expending money, resources and men in simply speeding up the inevitable?

Thus, the nationalists traded with the Japanese occupiers, stored up weapons and finances from the Americans intended for the anti-Japanese struggle, and waited for the more important battle to come. Nationalist troops also defected in large numbers to the Nanjing government established by the Japanese to rule occupied China under the cloak of Chinese rule. The communists suggested that this was nothing more than a cynical ploy to keep their forces out of harm's way, and fed and funded by the Japanese, until the civil war resumed as it inevitably would.

The sin was compounded by the nationalists' continued aggression against their supposed allies. In January 1941 they all but destroyed the communists' New Fourth Army in what became known as the South Anhui Incident. The attack on the communists when they were trying to fight the Japanese only served to enhance the nationalist credentials of the communists. Over the remaining years of the anti-Japanese conflict, many overseas Chinese returned to fulfil their patriotic duty. Whilst some did indeed make their way to Chongqing, Yanan and the communists became the focus for resistance for many non-communists. Indeed, Eastman puts the communists' victory down to the ineptitude, corruption and inefficiency of the Guomindang – the communists didn't so much win the revolution as the nationalists handed it to them on a plate.<sup>23</sup>

#### NATIONALISM AND COMMUNISM IN YANAN

While nationalism was a considerable force in gaining popular support for the communists, it was not the only tactic pursued. Gillin,<sup>24</sup> for example, places the emphasis on the radical land

reform programme in Shanxi province as a catalyst for winning the peasants' support. Thaxton's study of the Taihang guerrilla base area supports this view, noting that, if anything, nationalist appeals only detracted from the campaign against the landlords.<sup>25</sup> Selden similarly argues that whilst the party adopted anti-Japanese slogans after 1935, the campaign against exploitation and the landlords was the key to building the rural support base that brought them to power.<sup>26</sup>

A number of authors have tried to find a once-and-for-all explanation for why the communists won power. Was it the failings of the nationalists, the nationalist appeal of the communists, the communists' radical land reform programme, or the fact that the communists deployed a broad and moderate united front policy to win over non-communists? But one of the major successes of Mao's revolutionary strategy was his flexibility. The key thing was identifying what worked in any specific place at any specific time. Mao placed great emphasis on identifying what the major contradiction was at the time, and then building an alliance of forces to defeat that contradiction. Thus, on a general level, when the Japanese occupation was seen as the major contradiction, then the alliance to defeat the Japanese might include the national bourgeoisie (rich peasants, small landlords) and the petty bourgeoisie (professionals, intellectuals, small traders etc). If the Guomindang was seen as the major contradiction, then these groups might again form part of the communists' allied forces, as the nationalists had done so much to alienate them. But when feudalism and capitalism were seen as the major contradiction, then this meant a tighter revolutionary alliance, and revolution against the bourgeoisie.

Clearly, perceptions of what constituted the major threat changed over time depending on circumstances. But the major threat might also vary over place, and not just over time. In areas where the communists were strongest, the campaign against the landlords could be implemented. Where they were under greater threat, either from the Japanese, the Guomindang, or where the local population were unconvinced, then nationalism and/or a moderate united front were more applicable. Perhaps crucially, Mao pushed for a united front with rural and urban elites, as a renewed civil war with the nationalists became inevitable.<sup>27</sup> Recognising that nationalist aspirations alone were not going to win the revolution once the main force of colonialism

had been defeated, Mao argued that the acquiescence, if not support, of the middle classes was essential if the nationalists were to be defeated.

This is not to say that Mao simply abandoned his political convictions in order to seize power. While a broad united front was necessary to win the revolution, Mao was committed to ensuring that the party itself was a coherent and cohesive organisation following a specific political line. It perhaps goes without saying that the political line in question was Mao's own. Despite Mao's ascension to power at Zunyi, he still did not have a free rein in policy-making. Amongst the party leadership at Yanan, there were a number of leaders – indeed, the majority of leaders – who held on to notions of revolution and politics that owed much to Moscow and the Comintern. Some of these proletarian communists went along with Mao – particularly if he could deliver the revolution – but had very different visions of how any post-revolutionary society might work. Others, notably the group of '28 Bolsheviks' who were closest to the Comintern line, were even critical of strategy and policy in Yanan and other communist base areas, pointing to the contradiction between Chinese practice and Marxist-Leninist ideology. In combination, these provided a considerable obstacle to Mao and his ideas. If the revolution was won, then these men seemed likely to revert to type – to return to the Moscow-inspired Leninist model that had proved so unsuccessful in the revolution to date. As Steven Levine puts it, they were 'an urban party sojourning in the countryside'.<sup>26</sup>

So while the party was adopting a united front to convince the waverers in society, Mao was instigating a campaign within the party in Yanan to enforce his own ideas and strategies. Had they known at the time that the rectification campaign implemented in Yanan was a foretaste of what was to come after the revolution, some of China's leaders might have tried to dispense with Mao there and then. The main point of the rectification campaign was to establish the differences between orthodox Marxism – the writings of Marx and Engels and the experiences of the Soviet revolution – and Chinese Marxism. Whilst the latter was indebted to the former, the practical and unique experiences of the Chinese revolution must take precedence over dogma. Mao wanted to 'sinify' Marxism, or to develop a distinct brand of Marxism that reflected the realities and experiences of his revolution.

As part of this process of 'sinification', Mao railed against commandism – the process whereby party cadres told the people what to do because they, the party cadres, the revolutionary elite, knew what was best. Mao argued that the revolution should be embedded in the will of the people. The party must accept that it could learn from the people, and indeed it would only succeed if it actually listened to the people. In short, the Chinese proletariat<sup>29</sup> should be the source of wisdom and policy, and not dogmatic adherence to the works and ideas of Marx, Engels and Lenin.

The rectification campaign entailed party members getting together in small groups to discuss a number of documents which were provided by the party leadership. Although the works of other leaders were included in the compulsory texts, the vast majority were either written by Mao himself, or by writers sympathetic to Mao's line. The aim, originally at least, was not to flush out Mao's opponents and banish them from the party, but to give them a chance to rectify their failings by re-appraising their ideas. In practice, those who claimed to have seen the errors of their ways were rewarded by being brought back into the fold. Those who resisted intense peer pressure to conform became subject to investigations into their past by the communists' secret police force, headed by Mao's close ally Kang Sheng. Forced confessions, torture and execution were not unknown, and there is evidence that even Mao may have thought that it had gone too far. In the short term, the rectification campaign helped Mao to reassert his vision of revolution over those of the 28 Bolsheviks. But if they thought that they could ignore Mao once in power, they were very much mistaken. Not only did Mao's convictions return to haunt them on a number of occasions after 1949, but many also suffered at the hands of Kang Sheng during the Cultural Revolution.

### THE ASSUMPTION OF POWER

The war against Japan was a godsend for the communists. It first saved them from annihilation, and then gave them an opportunity to build support from a number of key groups. Nevertheless, when the Japanese capitulated after the American nuclear strikes on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, there was still much to be done to prevent the nationalists from re-taking the

reins of power. The nationalists held a massive superiority in terms of manpower and supplies. They also, initially at least, had the support of both the United States and the Soviet Union. But in the space of three and a quarter years, they were ousted from power, and forced out of China to the safe haven of Taiwan.

Despite the attempt by the American Marshall Mission to mediate a new coalition government between the communists and the nationalists, the civil war was essentially resumed by July 1946. The war can be roughly divided into three periods.<sup>30</sup> In the first year of the conflict, the Guomindang were on the offensive, gaining considerable territory in northern China, including the important capture of Yanan itself in March 1947. But while the communists recognised that losing Yanan was a big psychological blow, Mao was not prepared to fight to the death to keep it. As he had done in the Jiangxi Soviet period, Mao deployed guerrilla tactics, and was prepared (if not happy) to retreat and preserve manpower rather than fight a battle that he could not win.

Despite the territorial gains for the nationalists, the war was beginning to slide away from them even in this early period. During the first year of the war, they lost a million men, either by death or by defection to the communists. In comparison, the communist troops increased from around 800,000 to two million as troops defected, and the seeds of the Yanan period bore fruit with new recruits to defend the gains made under communist control. In the second phase from July 1947 to June 1948, the communists returned to the offensive, 'liberating' 146 cities and re-taking Yanan. During this period, the divisions within the Guomindang troops became ever sharper, and victory was frequently won as the poorly treated and ill-fed nationalist troops defected or simply gave up the fight.

The final phase of the war ran from June 1948 to October 1949, and the main battleground switched to north-east China. It is somewhat ironic that Mao's revolution, which was built on the revolutionary enthusiasm of the peasantry, was finally delivered in the one area of the country where the communists had considerable support in the cities. When the Japanese surrendered, the communists were in the best geographic position to move into the former occupied lands of north-east China. The Americans tried to transport nationalist troops into the north-east, but were refused permission to land troops in

Soviet-occupied Port Arthur, which had previously been designated a 'civilian city'. This action gave the communists the breathing space they needed to establish themselves in the north-east, and for Levine it meant that the Chinese revolution, in its final stages at least, actually owed more to the 'orthodox' Leninist concept of taking the cities first.<sup>31</sup>

As morale and cohesion collapsed in the nationalist forces, the communists won three key battles: Liaoxi-Shenyang, Huai-Hai and Tianjin. Chiang Kai-shek later put the blame on his commanders – their spirit was already broken and 'their morality is base'. He bled out on 21 January 1949, handing leadership over to Li Zongren. But the tide of the revolution was now inexorable. Ten days later, Beijing fell to the communists, followed by a string of other cities as the nationalists went on full retreat. On 30 September 1949 the party Central Committee elected Mao Zedong as the Chairman of the new People's Republic, which was formally established the following day at a mass rally in Tiananmen Square.

That the Chinese Communist Party survived the disasters of 1927 and 1930 is remarkable enough in itself. The fact that it survived the Long March, Japanese aggression, and Guomindang attacks in 1937–45 is equally remarkable. That it then went on to establish a new government by defeating a bigger, better-equipped army is nothing short of staggering. But winning the revolution was only the start. For Mao, it signalled the start of a new period of revolution that would bring forth more glorious advances. For many of his colleagues, it signalled the start of a period in which few of them were to survive unscathed by Mao's ambitions.

#### NOTES

1. Buddhism was not a major religious force in China at the time, so Mao's religious background was rather atypical.
2. Hollingworth, C. (1987) *Mao* (London: Triad) p. 15.
3. Indeed, the relationship between father and son was considered much more important than the relationship between husband and wife, with the wife only achieving any social status once she had provided the family with a male heir.
4. Although its successor, the Shang dynasty of 1765–1123 BC, is the earliest dynasty proven to exist by archaeological findings.