The tragedy of the 1925-1927 Chinese Revolution

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The rise and fall of the Second Chinese Revolution of 1925-1927 was one of the most significant political events in the history of the twentieth century. This failed revolution ended with the deaths of tens of thousands of communist workers and the total destruction of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as an organised mass movement of the working class. One cannot understand the fundamental problems in modern Chinese history, in particular the nature of the Maoist regime that was established in 1949, without understanding the lessons of 1925-27.

In 1930, Trotsky made the following appeal: "A study of the Chinese revolution is a most important and urgent matter for every communist and for every advanced worker. It is not possible to talk seriously in any country about the struggle of the proletariat for power without a study by the proletarian vanguard of the fundamental events, motive forces, and strategic methods of the Chinese revolution. It is not possible to understand what day is without knowing what night is; it is not possible to understand what summer is without having experienced winter. In the same way, it is not possible to understand the meaning of the methods of the October uprising without a study of the Chinese catastrophe" (*Leon Trotsky on China*, Monad Press, New York, 1978, p. 475).

The perspective for the Chinese revolution was at the heart of Trotsky's struggle against the Stalinist bureaucracy. In this struggle, his theory of Permanent Revolution was put to a gigantic test—for the second time. With the support of the Soviet bureaucratic apparatus Stalin prevailed, leading to the betrayal of one of the most promising revolutionary opportunities since 1917. The defeat in China was a decisive blow to the Left Opposition. At the end of 1927, Trotsky was expelled from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and then from the USSR.

This lecture will examine and highlight the critical role of revolutionary leadership, in direct opposition to the outlook of the Post-Soviet school of falsification. The methods and arguments advanced by two members of this tendency, British historians Ian Thatcher and Geoffrey Swain, have already been thoroughly exposed and refuted by David North in his recent work, *Leon Trotsky & the Post-Soviet School of Historical Falsification* (Mehring Books, Detroit, 2007). Their positions on the Chinese revolution merit attention here.

According to Thatcher, in relation to the events of 1925-27, Stalin and Trotsky shared the same view on the "necessity of a socialist China". This is to confuse two diametrically opposed perspectives. Trotsky represented the internationalist tendency, which recognised that the first socialist revolution in backward Russia was made possible, not primarily due to national conditions, but due to the world contradictions of capitalism. The October Revolution was only the beginning of the world socialist revolution in the advanced capitalist countries as well as in the oppressed colonies. Trotsky pointed out that the Chinese proletariat, like the Russian working class, was in a position to take power because the national bourgeoisie was no longer able, in the epoch of imperialism, to play a historically progressive role.

By contrast, Stalin ignored the fact that the productive forces in the imperialist epoch had outgrown the outmoded nation-states. He saw imperialist oppression only as an external obstacle to rising Chinese "national" capitalism, which was still capable of following the path of the classical bourgeois revolutions in Western Europe and North America. In order to allow the Chinese bourgeoisie to accomplish its national-democratic tasks, Stalin insisted that the working class must first subordinate itself to the bourgeois Kuomintang (KMT) regime. Thus the prospect of proletarian revolution was postponed for years, if not decades.

These two opposed conceptions produced very different policies. Trotsky demanded the political independence of the working class; Stalin forced the Chinese Communists to work as the "coolies" of the Kuomintang. Trotsky called for the building of Soviets as the organs of power of the workers and peasants; Stalin regarded the KMT as already some kind of revolutionary democratic regime. Trotsky warned the Chinese workers of the imminent danger of both the right and left wings of the KMT. Stalin firstly capitulated to the entire KMT and then, after Chiang Kai-shek massacred the Shanghai workers in April 1927, he ordered the Communists to turn to the "left" KMT leadership under Wang Chin-wei in Wuhan—only to see them purged in a bloodbath just three months later.

After the revolution entered a period of decline in the second half of 1927, Trotsky called for a systematic retreat in order to protect the party; Stalin criminally ordered the CCP to carry out putsches, which only led to the total destruction of the already shattered communist workers' organisations in the major centres, and the death of thousands of cadres.

Despite these fundamental differences, Thatcher argued, they were completely irrelevant to the tragic end of the Second Chinese Revolution. He claimed that, even had the Communist Party abandoned the Kuomintang in 1926, as demanded by Trotsky, "there is no evidence to suggest that it could have enjoyed any greater success in 1927" (*Trotsky*, Ian D. Thatcher, Routledge, 2003, p. 156).

For Thatcher, revolutionary program, perspective, leadership and tactics play no role in the decisive events of human history.

The origins of the Chinese Revolution

While the first socialist revolution, the Russian Revolution, took place in October 1917, its theoretical preparation within the Marxist movement had taken decades. But there was no such prolonged development in China. Just as the emergence of the Chinese working class was the product of the direct importation of foreign capital and industrial equipment into a backward semi-colonial country, the development of the Chinese Marxist movement was a direct extension of the Russian Revolution, skipping over centuries of Western social thought and the traditions of Social Democracy. The experience of the October Revolution was very relevant to China, given the similar characteristics of social and historical development of the two countries. Both were overwhelmingly agrarian societies, with unresolved democratic tasks and a small but

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rapidly growing working class.

The great tragedy of the Chinese revolution was that the monumental authority of the Russian Revolution was utilised, under the leadership of Stalin, to defend an opportunist policy based on the Mensheviks' "two-stage" theory.

For a more detailed study of the three conceptions of the Russian Revolution: the "two-stage" theory, Lenin's formula of the "democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry" and Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution, David North's 2001 lecture, "Towards a reconsideration of Trotsky's legacy and his place in the history of the 20th century"), is particularly important.

Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution, vindicated in the positive sense in the Russian Revolution, was tragically vindicated in the negative in the revolutionary defeats in China.

The main issue in the Chinese revolution was very similar to that which had arisen in Russia. China faced the urgent tasks of, firstly, national unification and independence from the divisions created by the warlords and the imperialist powers, and secondly, agrarian reform for hundreds of millions of poor peasants who hungered for land and an end to the barbarities of semi-feudal exploitation. But the Chinese bourgeoisie proved itself to be even more venal than its Russian counterpart—dependent on imperialism, incapable of integrating the nation, organically tied to the landlords and rural usurers and thus unable to carry out land reform. Above all, it was deeply fearful of the young and combative Chinese working class.

As in Russia, the rise of Chinese industry was dependent on international capital. Between 1902 and 1914, foreign investment in China doubled. In the following 15 years, foreign capital doubled again, totalling $3.3 billion and dominating China's main industries, particularly textiles, railway and shipping. In 1916, there were one million industrial workers in China; in 1922, there were twice as many. These workers were concentrated in a few industrial centres such as Shanghai and Wuhan. Tens of millions of semi-proletarians—artisans, shop keepers, clerks and the urban poor—shared their social aspirations with the working class.

Although physically small—a few million in a population of over 400 million—the Chinese proletariat was being propelled by the world contradictions of capitalism to take a leading role in the revolutionary struggles of the early twentieth century. The failure of the first Chinese revolution in 1911, under the leadership of Sun Yat-sen, demonstrated that the Chinese bourgeoisie was utterly incapable of accomplishing its own historical tasks.

Sun Yat-sen began to gather support in the 1890s after the Manchu dynasty rejected appeals for the establishment of a constitutional monarchy. Inspired by the classical bourgeois revolutions in America and France, Sun advocated the "Three People's Principles"—the overthrow of the imperial system, a democratic republic and the nationalisation of land. However, Sun made no attempt to build a mass political movement and largely confined himself to conspiratorial activities of small armed putsches or terrorist actions against individual Manchu officials.

The so-called "revolution" in 1911 involved simply a tap that knocked over a thoroughly rotten structure. Financially, the imperial government was on the verge of bankruptcy after decades of plundering by Western powers. Politically, the Manchu court was completely discredited after the imperialist powers annexed Chinese territory either in the form of colonies such as Hong Kong or Taiwan, or as "concessions" in port cities where foreign troops, police and legal system held sway. In 1900, the moribund Manchu dynasty had to rely on foreign troops to put down the Boxer Rebellion—a widespread anti-colonial uprising by peasants and the urban poor.

When the Manchu dynasty finally promised constitutional reform, it was too late. Significant sections of the Chinese bourgeoisie, bureaucracy and military had turned to Sun Yat-sen. On October 10, 1911, thousands of troops in Wuchang in Hubei province staged a rebellion and proclaimed a republic. The revolt rapidly spread across many Chinese provinces, but the lack of any genuine mass movement left vested interests untouched. The result was a loosely federated "Republic of China" with Sun as provisional president.

This new republic, however, was actually in the hands of the old military-bureaucratic apparatus, which opposed any attempt to give land to the peasantry. Sun rapidly compromised with these reactionary forces, wanting only international recognition for the Chinese republic. But the imperialist powers demanded Sun hand the presidency to the last Manchu dynasty prime minister Yuan Shikai, who was regarded by the Great Powers as a more reliable ruler—someone who could be trusted to maintain China as a semi-colonial country. After Yuan became president, he turned on Sun and his KMT or the Nationalist party, scrapped the constitution and dissolved parliament. In 1915, with the backing of Japan, Yuan proclaimed himself emperor. His short-lived attempt to restore the imperial system was only ended by revolts carried out by southern Chinese generals who supported the republic. Yuan was forced to resign and then died soon after.

Although the Chinese republic still nominally existed, it was carved up by rival warlords, each backed by different imperialist powers. The KMT survived in the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou or Canton, with the backing of local generals. Sun appealed for the smaller warlords to challenge the larger ones and unify the country, but no one answered his call.

The May Fourth Movement and the Russian Revolution

The failure of 1911 had a profound impact on layers of Chinese intellectuals. Chen Duxiu, later the founder of the Communist Party and the Trotskyist movement, pioneered the search for new intellectual horizons. This was an extraordinary era, which saw the rapid politicisation of many young people, who began actively participating in far-reaching ideological, cultural and political struggles in order to change the course of history. Chen's magazine, *New Youth*, later became the official organ of the Communist Party. Chen attracted large numbers of students who saw him as an uncompromising warrior against the reactionary influence of Confucianism. He took the radical step of introducing Western literature, philosophy and the social and natural sciences to these young Chinese.

The decisive political impulses came from international events. The outbreak of World War I in 1914, though mainly in Europe, had a major impact in China, followed by the monumental implications of the victory of Russian Revolution in 1917. Li Dazhao, the co-founder of the CCP, was the first to introduce Marxism into China. One of the earliest Marxist essays in China was his "The Victory of Bolshevism", written in 1918 and largely inspired by Trotsky's work, *War and the International* .

Li argued that World War I marked the beginning of "the class war… between the world proletarian masses and the world capitalists." The Bolshevik revolution was only the first step towards "the destruction of the presently existing national boundaries which are barriers to socialism and the destruction of the capitalist monopoly-profit system of production." Li hailed the October Revolution as "the new tide of the twentieth century", which was soon confirmed by the events in China. (*Li Ta-chao and the Origins of Chinese Marxism*, Maurice Meisner, Harvard University Press, 1967, p 68)

Under pressure from the Allied powers, China declared war on Germany and was formally part of the victorious camp. But in the horse-trading at the Versailles Conference in May 1919, the imperialist powers once again trampled on China's sovereignty by handing Germany's colonial concessions in Shandong to Japan. The news from Paris provoked a wave of angry protests by Beijing students and workers' strikes throughout the country against all the imperialist powers.

Popular illusions in Anglo-American "democracy" were utterly

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shattered. There was a widespread recognition among students and workers that the rival camps in World War I had been fighting for world domination and the interests of their own capitalist classes. Whoever won, the imperialist exploitation of China and other colonial countries would not stop. The victory of the Russian working class, on the other hand, opened up a new perspective for the Chinese masses.

The founding of the Chinese Communist Party in July 1921, under the leadership of Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao, was based on socialist internationalism. Despite its small numbers, the CCP drew strength from its program and the prestige of the October Revolution and grew rapidly. The CCP readily embraced the tactics elaborated at the Second and Third Congresses of the new Communist International, or Comintern, to fight for the leadership of the emerging national liberation movements.

In the discussion at the Second Congress, Lenin urged the young communist parties in the colonial countries to actively participate in the emerging national liberation movements, but specifically raised the "need for determined struggle against the attempt to paint the bourgeois-democratic liberation trends in the backward countries in communist colours; the Communist International must support the bourgeois-democratic national movements in colonial and backward countries only on condition that, in all backward countries, the elements of future proletarian parties, parties communist not only in name, shall be grouped together and educated to appreciate their special tasks, *viz* ., to fight the bourgeois-democratic movements within their own nations; the Communist International must enter into a temporary alliance with bourgeois democracy in colonial and backward countries, but must not merge with it and must under all circumstances uphold the independence of the proletarian movement even in its most rudimentary form…" (*Lenin On the National and Colonial Questions: Three Articles*, Foreign Language Press, Peking, 1975, p. 27).

With the defeat of the German revolution in 1923 and the death of Lenin in 1924, the essential political axis outlined by Lenin was abandoned. In the name of opposing "Trotskyism", a conservative section of the Bolshevik leadership led by Stalin rejected the basic lessons of 1917. Rather than encouraging a revolutionary breakthrough in China, this leadership was looking to establish relations with the so-called "democratic" faction of the Chinese bourgeoisie, in order to offset pressure from British and Japanese imperialism in the Far East.

Joining the KMT

The CCP's initial policy of forming a temporary alliance with the Kuomintang was based on the continuing independence of the two parties, each with its own organisation. But in August 1922, the Comintern leadership ordered the CCP to join the KMT as individual party members.

The CCP opposed the decision, but its objections were suppressed by the Comintern leadership under Zinoviev. Zinoviev justified the decision on the basis that the liberal-democratic KMT was the "only serious national-revolutionary group" in China. The independent working class movement was still weak, so the small CCP had to enter the KMT to expand its influence.

Many years later, in November 1937, Trotsky wrote to Harold Isaacs: "[T]he entering in itself in 1922 was not a crime, possibly not even a mistake, especially in the south, under the assumption that the Kuomintang at this time had a number of workers and the young Communist party was weak and composed almost entirely of intellectuals … In this case the entry would have been an episodic step to independent [sic], analogous to a certain degree to your entering the Socialist Party. The question is what was their purpose in entering and what was their subsequent policy?" (*The Bolsheviks and the Chinese Revolution 1919-1927*, Alexander Pantrov, Curzon Press 2000, p. 106).

As Stalin assumed control of the Comintern, he viewed the CCP's entry into the KMT not as a step towards building an independent mass party, but increasingly as a long-term policy aimed at achieving a bourgeois democratic revolution in China. In Stalin's eyes, the significance of the KMT far outweighed that of the Chinese section of the Comintern. In 1917, such a view would have been denounced by the Bolsheviks as a political capitulation to the bourgeoisie. But now Stalin was imposing this policy on China, claiming it represented the continuation of Leninism and the heritage of the October Revolution.

Following the Third Congress of the Comintern, the CCP formally called on all party members to join the KMT and virtually abandoned its own independent activity. When the Comintern dispatched Mikhail Borodin as its new delegate to China, he acted as an adviser to the KMT, which was restructured from top to bottom along Bolshevik organisational lines. Ten leading CCP members were placed into the KMT Central Executive Committee, about a quarter of the total. Communist cadres often directly took over aspects of the KMT's work.

The KMT's military apparatus was a direct product of Comintern policy. Until Sun Yat-sen established his "National Revolutionary Army" in 1924, he had only 150-200 loyal guards—compared to the 200,000-300,000 troops controlled by each of the northern warlords. Sun's dependence on the southern generals became obvious in 1922, when he was forced to flee to Shanghai after a local coup attempt. Only then did Sun turn to Moscow for help.

The Whampoa Military Academy in Guangzhou—the basis on which Chiang Kai-shek later rose to power—was established with the assistance of Soviet advisors. Without Soviet military aid and the CCP's ability to mobilise workers and peasants, the construction of a KMT army capable of defeating the powerful warlords was completely unthinkable.

The turn to the "left" KMT

Despite Chiang's brutal purges, the CCP still retained considerable reserves in Wuhan, a major industrial centre, as well as among the multi-millioned peasant movement along the Yangtze. A correct policy could have defeated Chiang's counterrevolution. Stalin, however, drew nothing from the bloody lessons of Shanghai. In his "Question of the Chinese Revolution" published on April 21, 1927, he proclaimed that his policy had been, and continued to be, "the only correct line". Chiang's massacre, he declared, merely demonstrated that the big bourgeoisie had deserted the revolution.

The "left" KMT, Stalin argued, still represented the revolutionary petty bourgeoisie, who would lead the agrarian revolution in the "second stage" of the revolution. "It means that, by waging a resolute struggle against militarism and imperialism, the revolutionary Kuomintang in Wuhan will become in fact the organ of a revolutionary-democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry…" He insisted therefore that the CCP had to maintain its close cooperation with the "left" KMT, and opposed the demands of Trotsky and the Left Opposition for the building of Soviets and for the CCP's political independence. (*On the Opposition*, J. V. Stalin, Foreign Language Press, Peking, 1974, pp. 663-664)

Replying to Stalin's theses, Trotsky subjected his theory of the "bloc of four classes" to a withering critique. "It is a gross mistake to think that imperialism mechanically welds together all the classes of China from without. … The revolutionary struggle against imperialism does not weaken, but rather strengthens the political differentiation of the classes," he explained. "[E]verything that brings the oppressed and exploited masses of the toilers to their feet inevitably pushes the national bourgeoisie into an open bloc with the imperialists. The class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the masses of workers and peasants is not weakened, but, on the contrary, is sharpened by imperialist oppression, to the point of bloody civil war at every serious conflict" (*Problems of the Chinese Revolution*, Leon Trotsky, New Park Publications, London, 1969, p. 5).

Trotsky insisted that the most urgent task was to establish the political independence of the Communist Party from the "left" KMT. "Precisely its lack of independence is the source of all evils and all the mistakes. In this

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fundamental question, the theses, instead of making an end once and for all to the practice of yesterday, propose to retain it 'more than ever before'. But this means that they want to retain the ideological, political and organisational dependence of the proletarian party upon a petty bourgeois party, which is inevitably converted into an instrument of the big bourgeoisie" (ibid., p. 18).

Stalin defended his "bloc of four classes" before students at the Moscow-based Sun Yat-sen University on May 13, 1927 with what can only be described as a parody of Marxism. "The Kuomintang is not an 'ordinary' petty bourgeois party. There are different kinds of petty bourgeois parties. The Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries in Russia were also petty bourgeois parties; but at the same time they were *imperialist* parties, because they were in a militant alliance with the French and British imperialists… can it be said that the Kuomintang is an imperialist party? Obviously not. The Kuomintang party is *anti-imperialist*, just as the revolution in China is anti-imperialist. The difference is fundamental" (*On the Opposition*, J. V. Stalin, Foreign Language Press, Peking, 1974, p. 671).

The absurd idea that Chiang Kai-shek was "anti-imperialist" because the Chinese revolution was anti-imperialist was refuted, not only by Trotsky, but by history itself. The KMT's opposition to one or other of the major powers did not constitute opposition to imperialism as such. KMT leaders were simply manoeuvring between the imperialist powers, while spouting "anti-imperialist" slogans all the while to confuse the masses. Confronted with the Japanese invasion in the 1930s and 1940s, for example, Chiang had no hesitation in turning to Britain and the US. As for the leader of the "left" KMT, Wang Ching-wei went one step further and became the head of Japan's puppet Chinese regime. It should be burnt into everyone's memory that Chiang, who ended his days as the head of the despised anti-communist dictatorship on Taiwan, once toasted the world socialist revolution in Moscow alongside the Stalinist leadership.

The defeat in Wuhan

While Stalin was hailing the "revolutionary centre" in Wuhan at the Eighth Plenum of the ECCI, a number of the "left" KMT commanders, in violation of the official policy of their party, were already striking against communists, the trade unions and the peasants associations in the region. On May 17, 1927, just before the plenum, one of the bloodiest repressions took place in Changsha, but no mention of it was made at the meeting. Instead, Stalin denounced the Left Opposition's demands for the building of Soviets as inimical to the CCP's continued alliance with the "left" KMT. "Does the Opposition understand that the creation of Soviets of workers' and peasants' deputies now is tantamount to the creation of a dual government, shared by the Soviets and Hankow government, and necessarily and inevitably leads to the slogan calling for the overthrow of the Hankow Government?" he thundered (*The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution*, Harold R. Isaacs, Stanford University Press, 1961, p. 241).

Trotsky's reply remained unpublished for a year. In a powerful warning of what was to come, he repudiated Stalin's policy and called on the Comintern to do likewise. "We say directly to the Chinese peasants: The leaders of the Left Kuomintang of the type of Wang Ching-wei and Company will inevitably betray you if you follow the Wuhan heads instead of forming your own independent Soviets… Politicians of the Wang Ching-wei type, under difficult conditions, will unite ten times with Chiang Kai-shek against the workers and peasants. Under such conditions two Communists in a bourgeois government become impotent hostages, if not a direct mask for the preparation of a new blow against the working masses… *The Chinese bourgeois democratic revolution will go forward and be victorious either in the soviet form or not at all"* (*Leon Trotsky on China*, Monad Press, New York, 1978, p234-235, emphasis in original).

Again, Trotsky's warnings proved correct. After the bloodbath in Shanghai, Chiang Kai-shek's regime effectively imposed an economic blockade on Wuhan, forcing businessmen and landowners to flee. The rising mass movement terrified Wang Ching-wei, who demanded that the two communist ministers in his government—for agriculture and labour—use their influence to curb the "excessive" actions of the peasants and workers.

The official CCP policy directly conflicted with the mass movement. In many rural areas, peasant associations had driven out the landlords and were functioning as the local authority. In two major cities, Wuhan and Changsha, inflation and business closures had hit workers hard, compelling them to raise revolutionary demands for the takeover of factories and shops. Trotsky's demand for the construction of Soviets was very timely. Soviets were not, as Stalin argued, simply a means for directing armed insurrection, but the democratically elected vehicles through which working people, in the midst of a revolutionary upheaval, could begin to reorganise economic and social life and to defend their interests against counter-revolution.

Peng Shuzi explained later that the unions and peasant organisations in Hunan and Hubei had a membership of millions. "This was a great organised mass force. *If the CCP had followed Trotsky's advice at that time and relied upon this great mass of organised force, while calling for the organisation of worker-peasant-soldier soviets to become the central revolutionary organisation, and, through these armed soviets carried out the agrarian revolution, giving land to the peasants and revolutionary soldiers, they not only could have assembled all the poor masses of Hunan and Hupeh into soviets, but they could have destroyed the foundation of the reactionary officers immediately, and indirectly destabilised Chiang's army. In this way, the revolution could have developed from the destruction of the roots of counterrevolutionary power and advanced along the road of proletarian dictatorship "* (*Leon Trotsky on China*, Monad Press, New York, 1978, p. 66, emphasis in original).

Despite his stupid glorification of the "left" KMT, Stalin also realised his policy was crumbling. On June 1, 1927 he issued an order to the CCP that it create its own army with 20,000 communists and 50,000 workers and peasants. But revolutions are not susceptible to bureaucratic fiat. As Trotsky had pointed out, the precondition for building a revolutionary army, was the consolidation of the party's authority over the masses and a concrete means for cementing the alliance between the working class and peasantry. By rejecting the building of Soviets, Stalin prevented the CCP from establishing the necessary basis for creating its own army.

As Wang Ching-wei's imminent betrayal became obvious, CCP leader Chen Duxiu once again demanded that the party quit the KMT. Once again, the Comintern turned down the request. In early July, Chen angrily resigned as the party's general secretary. Chen's successor, Chu Quibai, immediately demonstrated his loyalty to Stalin by declaring, even at this life and death moment, that the KMT "is naturally in the leading position of the national revolution".

On July 15, Wang Ching-wei formally issued an order demanding all communists leave the KMT or face severe punishment. Like Chiang, it was Wang who squeezed the CCP "like a lemon" and then cast it aside, unleashing another, even more brutal, wave of repression against the communists and the insurgent masses.

A contemporary news report explained: "In the past three months, the reaction has spread from the lower Yangtze until today it is dominant in all the territory under so-called Nationalist control. Tang Sheng-chih has proven himself an even more effective commander of execution squads than of armies in battle. In Hunan his subordinate generals have carried out a clean-up of 'Communists' that Chiang Kai-shek can scarcely parallel. The usual methods of shooting and beheading have been abetted by methods of torture and mutilation which reek of the horrors of the dark ages and the Inquisition. The results have been impressive. The peasant and labour unions of Hunan, probably the most effectively organised in the whole country, are completely smashed. Those leaders who have escaped the burning in oil, the burying alive, the torture by slow

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strangulation by wire, and other forms of death too lurid to report, have fled the country or are in such careful hiding that they cannot easily be found…" (*The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution*, Harold R. Isaacs, Stanford University Press, 1961, p. 272).

Yet again, Stalin insisted that his policies had been correct and blamed the defeats on the CCP leadership, particularly Chen. With the Left Opposition's criticisms increasingly finding an audience in the Soviet working class, Stalin sought to salvage his reputation by sharply turning from opportunism to its mirror opposite—adventurism. Having been responsible for two crushing defeats on the CCP and the Chinese masses, Stalin ordered the shattered party to carry out a series of armed insurrections that were doomed to failure. In an anticipation of his "Third Period" ultra-left theory of the early 1930s, Stalin assigned to the proletariat the immediate task of taking power, right at the point when the Chinese revolution was receding. As Trotsky explained, what was needed was a regroupment of the CCP and the working class, defensive democratic slogans and, above all, the drawing of the necessary lessons—all of which Stalin adamantly opposed.

The lesson of the Guangzhou "Soviet"

The final gasp of the Chinese revolution—the Guangzhou uprising in December 1927—was nothing short of criminal. It was timed to coincide, not with a mass movement in Guangzhou, but with the opening of the Fifteenth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party. Its main purpose was to enhance the reputation of the Stalinist leadership and to fend off the Left Opposition's criticisms. Lacking mass support, the attempt to create a Soviet government with several thousand party cadres had no possibility of succeeding. Some 5,700 people, many of them the best of the surviving revolutionary cadres, were killed in the heroic battle to defend the short-lived Guangzhou "Soviet".

Stalin's Soviet theory was finally put to the test. Throughout the revolution, Stalin had argued that Soviets must only be created at the last moment, as the means of organising the insurrection and, most importantly, not before the "democratic" stage had been completed. But as Trotsky continued to insist, Soviets were, in reality, the means for drawing broad layers of working people into political struggle. They could not be imposed from the top, but emerged from the revolutionary grass roots movement, including factory committees and strike committees. As the revolutionary crisis developed, the Soviets would evolve into the new organs of working class power.

In Guangzhou, the CCP bureaucratically established a body called "Soviet" as the means for carrying out an insurrection in the city. But the "tremendous response" anticipated by Stalin did not eventuate, because ordinary workers and peasants did not even know their "deputies" to this so-called Soviet. Only a tiny number of workers supported the Guangzhou "Soviet" government, which was quickly crushed.

Stalin maintained that the tasks of Guangzhou uprising were bourgeois democratic. But, as Trotsky pointed out, even in this failed adventure, the proletariat was compelled to go further. During its limited life, the CCP was forced to take power by its own and to carry out radical social measures, including the nationalisation of large industries and banks. As Trotsky declared, if these measures were "bourgeois", then it would be hard to imagine what a proletarian revolution in China would look like. In other words, even in the Guangzhou insurrection, the CCP leadership was compelled to follow the logic of the Permanent Revolution, not Stalin's "two-stage" theory.

The failure of the Guangzhou uprising marked the end of the revolution in the urban centres. Those CCP leaders who did not join the Left Opposition such as Mao Zedong, fled to the countryside. Under pressure from the Stalinist bureaucracy to implement the Comintern's "Third Period" line and create "Soviets", a new current emerged in the CCP. Championed by Mao, this tendency effectively severed its roots in the working class and based itself on the peasantry. To continue the "armed struggle", the CCP created a "Red Army" composed mainly of peasants, and established "Soviets" in China's rural backwaters. By the early 1930s, the CCP had virtually abandoned its work within the urban working class.

Mao, whose political outlook had more in common with peasant populism than with Marxism, emerged quite naturally as the new leader of this tendency. Before joining the Communist Party, he had been deeply influenced by a Japanese utopian socialist school, "New Village" that had drawn on the Russian Narodniks. New Village promoted collective cultivation, communal consumption and mutual aid in autonomous villages as the road to "socialism". This "rural socialism" reflected not the interests of the revolutionary proletariat, but the hostility of the decaying peasantry towards the destruction of small-scale farming under capitalism.

Even after joining the Communist Party, Mao never abandoned this orientation towards the peasantry and was unerringly in the right-wing of the party during the upheavals of 1925-1927. Even at the height of the working class movement in 1927, Mao continued to hold that the proletariat was an insignificant factor in the Chinese revolution. "If we allot ten points to the accomplishment of the democratic revolution, then… the urban dwellers and military units rates only three points, while the remaining seven points should go to the peasants…" (*Stalin's Failure in China 1924-1927*, Conrad Brandt, The Norton Library, New York, 1966, p. 109).

The consequences of defeat

Shortly after the defeat of the Chinese revolution, Trotsky was expelled from the Communist Party, sent into internal exile and expelled from the USSR. The record of 1925-1927 in China makes clear that Trotsky and the Left Opposition were well aware of what was at stake in the Chinese revolution for the international working class. Trotsky was engaged in a titanic political struggle to transform the policy of the Comintern and to create the best conditions for a revolutionary victory. Least of all was it a question of being proven formally correct.

In his autobiography, *My Life*, which was written during his exile in 1928, Trotsky recalled what happened in the Soviet Union after Chiang Kai-shek drowned the Shanghai workers in blood. "A wave of excitement swept over the party. The opposition raised its head. … Many younger comrades thought that the patent bankruptcy of Stalin's policy was bound to bring the triumph of the opposition nearer. During the first days after the coup d'etat by Chiang Kai-shek I was obliged to pour many a bucket of cold water over the hot heads of my young friends—and over some not so young. I tried to show them that the opposition could not rise on the *defeat* of the Chinese revolution. The fact that our forecast had proved correct might attract one thousand, five thousand, or even ten thousand new supporters to us. But for the millions the significant thing was not our forecast, but the fact of the crushing of the Chinese proletariat. After the defeat of the German revolution in 1923, after the break-down of the English general strike in 1926, the new disaster in China would only intensify the disappointment of the masses in the international revolution. And it was this same disappointment that served as the chief psychological source for Stalin's policy of national-reformism" (*My Life: An Attempt at an Autobiography*, Leon Trotsky, Penguin Books, 1979, pp. 552-553).

Although Stalin attempted to fence Trotsky off from the rest of the Comintern and the CCP, his efforts were only partially successful. A group of Chinese students studying in the Soviet Union came under the influence of the Left Opposition and participated in its protest on November 7, 1927, in Red Square, amid the bureaucracy's 10th anniversary celebrations of the October Revolution. By the end of 1928, at least 145 Chinese students had formed secret Trotskyist organisations in Moscow and Leningrad.

At the same time, during the Sixth Congress of the Comintern, Trotsky wrote his famous critique of the Comintern program. A few Chinese

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Communist Party delegates, including Wang Fanxi, were able to read Trotsky's writings and accepted the Left Opposition's analysis. After some of these Chinese students returned to China in 1929, a section of the CCP leadership, including Chen Duxiu and Peng Shuzi, turned to Trotskyism and formed the Chinese Left Opposition.

In China, the KMT, which had extended its influence by exploiting the mass revolutionary upheavals, proved utterly incapable of holding the country together or of ruling "democratically". The Kuomintang's "white terror" endured for years. From April to December 1927, an estimated 38,000 people were executed and more than 32,000 jailed as political prisoners. From January to August 1928, more than 27,000 people were sentenced to death. By 1930, the CCP estimated approximately 140,000 people had been murdered or had died in prisons. In 1931, over 38,000 people were executed as political enemies. The Chinese Left Opposition was not only hunted down by the KMT's police, it was also betrayed to the authorities by the Stalinist CCP leadership.

The political consequences of the failed revolution extended far beyond the borders of China. A victory would, similarly, have had a momentous impact throughout Asia and in other colonial countries. Among other things, it would have given huge impetus to the Japanese working class in its struggles against the rise of Japanese militarism in the 1930s and the plunge towards world war.

As world capitalism once again descends into crisis, along with the drive to militarism and war, the Chinese and international working class can only prepare for the upheavals that lie ahead by thoroughly assimilating the political lessons of the defeat of the Chinese Revolution.

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