

Internationalist Socialism vs. Nationalist Reformism, Part 3

Leon Trotsky and the Second Chinese Revolution, 1925-27

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The following lecture was delivered by Peter Symonds, national WSW editor for the Socialist Equality Party (Australia), at the SEP (US) 2025 International Summer School, held August 2-9, 2025. This is the third part of the lecture “Internationalist Socialism vs. Nationalist Reformism.” Part 1 by Clara Weiss was published here and Part 2 by Chris Marsden here.

The WSW is also publishing a primary source document written by Leon Trotsky to accompany this lecture, Section 3 of The Third International After Lenin, titled, “Summary and Perspectives of the Chinese Revolution: Its Lessons for the Countries of the Orient and for the Whole of the Comintern.” We encourage our readers to study this text alongside the lecture. The full volume is available for purchase here on Mehring Books.

1. This year marks the centenary of the Second Chinese Revolution. It erupted in May 1925 fuelled by the slave-labour conditions facing workers. Strikes were met by brutal repression. The immediate trigger was the murder of a worker by a Japanese foreman in Shanghai. Anti-imperialist protests by students and workers throughout the city spread nationally after British police on May 30 fired on thousands of protesters, killing 12. In response, the entire city was paralysed by a general strike. Throughout the country around 400,000 workers took part in some 135 strikes.

The opposition continued to grow. When British and French troops opened fire with machineguns on a large protest march in Canton on June 23, 100,000 workers left the nearby British colony of Hong Kong, and a boycott of British goods was declared, under the direction of a Canton-Hong Kong Strike Committee. The events were the start of a powerful revolutionary movement that was to embrace millions of workers and peasants across China over the next two years.

2. The devastating defeat of the revolution in 1927, as a direct consequence of Stalin’s policies, was a major strategic experience of the international working class and a critical turning point in the political consolidation of the Left Opposition. The first lecture of this school demonstrated why Trotsky’s Theory of Permanent Revolution proved to be the fundamental basis for the victory of the Bolsheviks in October 1917. The tragic outcome of the Second Chinese Revolution was a second confirmation of Permanent Revolution, but in the negative.

3. The Stalinist perspective of “Socialism in One Country” and rejection of socialist internationalism had as its corollary the revival of the Menshevik two-stage theory, which assigned to the so-called national bourgeoisie in China the leading role in the bourgeois national revolution. Stalin exploited the authority of the Russian Revolution to foist this theory on the young Communist Party and subordinate it to the nationalist party of the Chinese bourgeoisie—the Kuomintang (KMT).

Stalin claimed that in China imperialist oppression had welded anti-imperialist forces together into a bloc of four classes—the national

bourgeoisie, the proletariat, the peasantry and petty bourgeoisie—that would carry out the revolution. The KMT would lead the revolution while the Communist Party was to be its loyal political servant. Nothing should be done to threaten capitalist property relations and thus the bloc of four classes. The fight for socialism was relegated to a distant second stage.

4. Drawing on the Theory of Permanent Revolution and the experiences of the Russian Revolution, Trotsky explained that, far from welding the classes together, the development of the revolution would inevitably lead to a confrontation between the working class and the bourgeoisie. He insisted that the Communist Party had to establish its political independence from the KMT and fight for the leadership of, and develop, the revolutionary movement of workers and peasants by calling for the formation of Soviets, which Stalin repeatedly opposed.

5. In the wake of defeat of the revolution in Germany in October 1923, the Stalinist clique sought to cover up its own responsibility by promoting a radically false assessment of the world situation as one of “permanent” revolutionary possibilities ahead, rather than of revolutionary ebb. This ultra-leftism led to failed adventures and also, given a temporary quiescence in the working class, an orientation to other class forces. What Trotsky termed in *The Third International After Lenin*, the right leaven of this ultra-leftism was to emerge later with the belated recognition of a relative economic stabilisation of capitalism in a lurch to the right. The right centrist down-sliding that produced the defeat of the British General Strike also led to the opportunist embrace of the Kuomintang in China.

6. It is not possible in the space of the time available to give a blow-by-blow account of the Chinese revolution as it unfolded over two years. For those who want to make a study, *The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution* by Harold Isaacs, for which Trotsky wrote an important introduction, is recommended. The book has stood the test of time, despite Isaacs’ later sharp turn to the right, and is an important companion to the crucial writings and polemics of Trotsky at the time.

7. The Chinese Revolution is not simply an interesting history lesson. The political ramifications reverberate down to the present—not just in China, where the 1949 or Third Chinese Revolution was deformed by the Maoist version of “Socialism in One Country.” The Menshevik formulas codified and sanctified by Stalinism in China—the two-stage theory, the bloc of four classes and the glorification of the so-called progressive national bourgeoisie—have been responsible for defeat after defeat of the working class, in Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America, in the century that followed.

8. In the time available, this lecture will just outline the major turning points and political lessons of the Second Chinese Revolution over the two years from May/June 1925 to December 1927.

Some background is necessary. China in the 1920s was a fractured, semi-colonial country. The major imperialist powers, Britain chief among them,

had imposed unequal treaties on the tottering Manchu dynasty through gunboat diplomacy. Each of them had carved out enclaves, or “concessions,” in cities like Shanghai, where their law and police prevailed. The Manchu dynasty was overthrown in the First Chinese Revolution of 1911. But the weakness of the Chinese bourgeoisie was exemplified by the inability of the new republic’s first president—Sun Yat-sen—to unify the country, which was carved up between rival warlords. His party—the Chinese National Party or Kuomintang—controlled only the southern city of Canton. Its very weakness was why Sun Yat-sen had turned to the Soviet Union for aid and assistance in forging a military. In 1924, Soviet advisers helped establish the Whampoa Military Academy.

9. The Chinese Communist Party had been established in 1921, just four years prior to the outbreak of the revolution. In August 1922, the Comintern directed the young Communist Party to join the Kuomintang as individual members and work within its ranks. It was not until the following year, because of widespread opposition in the Chinese Communist Party, that it was finally prevailed upon to do so. When the question was discussed in the Politburo in Moscow in January 1923, Trotsky was alone in opposing the decision. Far from being a temporary step towards building an independent party, under Stalin it became a long-term policy as he embraced the Kuomintang as the leader of the Chinese revolution.

Despite its subordination to the Kuomintang, the Communist Party gained considerable influence in the working class. On May Day 1925, on the eve of the revolution, the Communist Party’s Second National Labour Congress convened organisations that represented 570,000 workers.

10. The death of Sun Yat-sen in March 1925 had provoked factional infighting within the Kuomintang between Chiang Kai-shek, its army commander and head of the Whampoa Military Academy, and the nominally left Wang Ching-wei, who headed the party and its government in Canton. That culminated in a March 1926 coup in which Chiang Kai-shek seized control of the Kuomintang. He sidelined the “left” leadership and at the same time moved against the Communist Party and the working class. Chiang also detained 50 prominent Communist leaders and placed all Soviet advisers under arrest. Communists were henceforth barred from leading positions and committees within the Kuomintang and were forced to advocate the bourgeois liberal ideology of Sun Yat-sen. The internal crackdown was mirrored by repression against strikes by workers and action by the peasantry. The long-running Canton-Hong Kong strike was shut down in October 1926.

Having consolidated his grip over the Kuomintang, Chiang launched a military campaign in July 1926—the Northern Expedition—against the northern warlords in a bid to extend Kuomintang rule throughout China.

11. What was Stalin’s response? He instructed the Communist Party to remain inside the Kuomintang, despite being politically and organisationally bound hand and foot, and ordered it to assist the Northern Expedition in every way. For the masses, the KMT’s military victories were seen as the beginning of the revolution. When Hunan province was liberated from the warlords, for instance, four million farmers flooded into peasant associations in just five months, and half a million workers joined the CCP-led General Labour Union. Chiang relied on the CCP to channel this huge movement behind the Kuomintang.

12. In the Soviet Union, Trotsky and the Left Opposition demanded the political independence of the Communist Party from the KMT and warned of the consequences, despite the increasing censorship, provocations and repression of the Stalinist apparatus. Trotsky wrote in September 1926 that “the rise of a mighty strike wave among the Chinese workers” meant that the immediate political task facing the Communist Party “must now be to fight for direct independent leadership of the awakened working class.” He warned:

The leftward movement of the masses of Chinese workers is as certain a fact as the rightward movement of the Chinese bourgeoisie. Insofar as the Kuomintang has been based on the political and organizational union of the workers and the bourgeoisie, it must now be torn apart by the centrifugal tendencies of the class struggle.

Leon Trotsky on China, Monad Press, New York, 1976, p. 114

13. Stalin, however, continued to promote Chiang and the Kuomintang as the leadership of the Chinese revolution. In March 1926, the Comintern had formally included the Kuomintang as a “sympathizing” section of the Comintern and put Chiang on its presidium as an “honorary” chairman. Stalin dismissed mounting signs that Chiang was preparing to crack down on the Communist Party and continued to insist that nothing be done to jeopardize the relationship with the Kuomintang. As a result, the Communist Party was barred from forming Soviets of workers and peasants even though they gravitated towards establishing them.

14. In March 1927, after Chiang’s armies had seized Nanking, the Communist Party organised an armed insurrection in Shanghai, China’s most industrialised city, backed by a general strike of 800,000 workers, to crush the warlord forces. Under the aegis of the city’s General Labour Union, it took total control of the city, except for the foreign concessions, terrifying the bourgeoisie. In what became an increasingly open secret, Chiang conspired with the city’s businessmen and gangsters to deliver a deadly blow against the Shanghai proletariat and the Communist Party.

15. Stalin, however, ordered the Communist Party to bury its arms and to welcome Chiang’s troops into the city. In a notorious speech in the Hall of Columns in Moscow on April 5, 1927, which, to my knowledge, has never been published in English, at least, Stalin declared:

Chiang Kai-shek is submitting to discipline. The Kuomintang is a bloc, a sort of revolutionary parliament, with the right, the left, and the Communists. Why make a coup d’etat? Why drive away the right when we have the majority and when the right listens to us? ... [T]hey have to be utilised to the end, squeezed out like a lemon, and then flung away.

The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution, Harold Isaacs, Haymarket Books, Chicago, 2010, p.137

Just a week later, on April 12, 1927, it was Chiang who flung the Communist Party aside and unleashed a bloodbath. A general strike was answered with bullets. Hundreds of workers and communists were savagely butchered and the city’s Communist Party and General Labour Union shattered. In the reign of “white terror” that followed, thousands of communist workers were murdered in Shanghai and other cities under Chiang’s control.

16. In the wake of this monumental disaster, in Moscow on April 21, *Pravda* published Stalin’s theses on “The Problems of the Chinese Revolution,” in which he declared that the events “proved that the line laid down was the correct line.” Trotsky wrote a devastating reply, “The Chinese Revolution and the Theses of Comrade Stalin,” in which he refuted point by point the justifications for the betrayal of the Chinese working class. It was not published.

17. To Stalin’s claim that imperialist oppression yoked together the proletariat with the national bourgeoisie in a bloc of four classes with the peasantry and urban petty bourgeoisie, Trotsky wrote:

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... Everything 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.

Leon Trotsky on China, Monad Press, New York, 1976, p. 161

18. A further justification for the claim that the national bourgeoisie in China could play a revolutionary role was the supposed predominance of “remnants of feudalism.” But as Trotsky explained, what predominated in China were capitalist relations which reached into every aspect of society. The hated money-lender in the village was linked with finance capital in the cities—a nexus that would only be ended through a revolutionary movement of the working class supported by the peasantry against the bourgeoisie.

19. As Stalin prepared a second edition of the Chinese tragedy by subordinating the Communist Party to the “left” Kuomintang based in Wuhan, he again declared that the time was not ripe for the formation of Soviets. The creation of Soviets, he said, would mean an insurrection against the “revolutionary Kuomintang.” Trotsky explained that despite the Shanghai massacre, all the signs were that the revolution had not been crushed. Soviets were the essential means through which the millions of workers and peasants could organise the revolutionary struggle and meet up with the experiences of the masses.

The Chinese peasant knows that the soviets gave the land to the Russian peasant... The Chinese workers know that the soviets guaranteed the liberty of the Russian proletariat. The experience of the counterrevolution of Chiang Kai-shek must have made the advanced workers understand that without an independent organisation embracing the whole proletariat and assuring its collaboration with the oppressed masses of the city and the land, the revolution cannot triumph.

Leon Trotsky on China, Monad Press, New York, 1976, p. 17]

20. The “left” Kuomintang, Stalin argued, still represented the revolutionary petty bourgeoisie, who would lead the agrarian revolution in the “second stage” of the revolution. Yet “left” KMT military commanders were already ignoring official party policy and carrying out bloody attacks on communists, trade unions and peasants’ associations in the region. Rather than condemn the attacks, Stalin denounced the Left Opposition’s call for Soviets as amounting to a call for the overthrow of the left Kuomintang government of Wang Ching-wei.

21. In a speech to the eighth plenum of the Comintern in May, Trotsky warned:

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... 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, 1976, pp. 234-235

22. Stalin, however, ordered the Communist Party to remain within the left Kuomintang. Communist leaders Tan Ping-shan and Hsu Chao-jen held two key ministerial posts, for agriculture and labour respectively, in the bourgeois government. Amid the continuing rise of revolutionary struggles, Wang Ching-wei insisted they use their influence to curb the “excessive” actions of the peasants and workers. 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, workers hard hit by inflation and business closures raised demands for the takeover of factories and shops.

23. Two months later, Trotsky’s warnings proved tragically correct. On July 15, Wang Ching-wei formally ordered all communists to leave the KMT or face severe punishment. Like Chiang Kai-shek, it was Wang who squeezed the Communist Party “like a lemon” and cast it aside. The wave of terror unleashed against communists, peasants and workers was, if anything, more brutal and widespread than that of Chiang. The peasant and labour unions of Hunan were completely smashed. M.N. Roy, the chief Comintern delegate to the Kuomintang, whose chief concern was to cover up the extent of the defeat, estimated that 25,000 Communists had been killed at the hands of Chiang and Wang in the first half of 1927—along with many more workers and peasants.

24. Once again, Stalin declared that his political line had been correct and blamed Chinese Communist Party leader Chen Tu-hsiu for the disaster. In the wake of the two catastrophic defeats inflicted on the Communist Party, the working class and oppressed masses, Stalin ordered an abrupt left-about-face—paralleling the ultra-leftism that immediately followed the defeat of the German Revolution in 1923. Right at the point when the revolutionary tide was receding, the CCP was forced to embark on a series of failed adventures, culminating in December 1927 in the order to establish a Soviet in Canton and seize power. It was timed to coincide, not with any revolutionary upsurge in Canton, but with the opening of the 15th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and designed to fend off the criticisms of the Left Opposition.

25. The Communist Party waged a courageous struggle over three days from December 11-13, although greatly outnumbered and outgunned, to establish control of key buildings in Canton, and issued a bold manifesto that foreshadowed deep inroads into capitalist property relations. But there was no rising mass movement or basis for an elected Soviet, and little prospect for support from elsewhere even if the uprising were successful. Few workers responded to the appeals for mass meetings. No call for a general strike was made. The Kuomintang rapidly mobilised its military forces to crush the rebellion with savage brutality, marking the end of the revolution.

Even in its defeat, Trotsky drew vital political lessons from the Canton Commune which was testament to the fact that the proletariat alone was capable of carrying out the tasks of the bourgeois democratic revolution and in doing so would be compelled to begin the socialist reconstruction of society. As he explained:

The program of the new state power consisted not only in the confiscation of whatever feudal estates there may be in Kwangtung in general; not only in the establishment of the workers’ control of production; but also in the nationalization of big industry, banks, and transportation, and even the confiscation of bourgeois dwellings and all bourgeois property for the benefit of the toilers. The question arises: if these are the methods of a bourgeois

revolution then what should the proletarian revolution in China look like?

The Third International After Lenin, Pathfinder, Fourth edition, 1996, p.194

26. In opening the section of *The Third International after Lenin* devoted to the Chinese Revolution, Trotsky wrote:

Bolshevism and Menshevism and the Left wing of the German and international social democracy took definite shape on the analysis of the experiences, mistakes, and tendencies of the 1905 revolution. An analysis of the experiences of the Chinese revolution is today of no less importance for the international proletariat.

The Third International After Lenin, Pathfinder, Fourth edition, 1996, p. 180

In the course of the inner-party struggle during 1925-27, the unbridgeable gulf between Bolshevism and Menshevism had been redrawn in a new form in the struggle of the Left Opposition against the policies of Stalin which had proven to be a disaster. The Theory of Permanent Revolution had been furnished with new proof but at a terrible cost. And as Trotsky warned, although the Left Opposition had won thousands of new adherents, Stalin would exploit the defeat and its impact on the Soviet working class to intensify its repression. At the 15th Congress, the Left Opposition was expelled from the party and its leaders, including Trotsky, were sent into internal exile.

At the same time, Trotsky's writings on China clarified the reasons for the devastating defeat, laying the basis for the formation of Chinese Left Opposition. Among those who joined its ranks were former members and leaders of the Communist Party, including its founding chairman Chen Tu-hsiu, along with many Chinese students who had been won to the Left Opposition while studying in Moscow.



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