

# *Red Dawn over China: An extended exercise in anti-communist propaganda*

*Red Dawn over China—How Communism Conquered a Quarter of Humanity*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2026

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The new book *Red Dawn over China—How Communism Conquered a Quarter of Humanity* by Frank Dikötter, published in February, claims to explain how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) came to power. It is a fundamentally flawed work that makes little pretence of academic objectivity or intellectual honesty and is nothing more than an extended exercise in anti-communist mudslinging aimed against the CCP and the 1949 Chinese Revolution itself.

That such a shoddy book should be released now and receive considerable international publicity, almost exclusively positive and laudatory, points to its political purpose. It complements the barrage of propaganda emanating from Washington and its allies to demonise China as “expansionist” and “aggressive” as the Trump administration continues the preparations to expand the wars in the Middle East and Europe to envelope China in a global conflict of catastrophic proportions.

*Red Dawn* is the latest in a series of similarly tendentious books by Dikötter on modern China that coincide with the shift in Washington’s attitude to Beijing from a vast source of cheap labour to a burgeoning threat to US imperialism’s global dominance. The first of his trilogy of books on Mao’s China published in 2010 found a ready audience as Barack Obama assumed office and initiated the so-called pivot to Asia—a diplomatic and economic offensive against China combined with a massive military build-up throughout the Indo-Pacific that has only intensified under subsequent administrations.

Dikötter’s entire opus is based on the fundamental premise of Cold War propaganda that falsely equated socialism and communism with Stalinism in all its varieties, including Maoism in China, and lauded US imperialism as the champion of democracy. In doing so, he ignores the political struggle waged by Leon Trotsky against the opportunist policies of Stalin that led to a devastating defeat of the revolutionary movement in China in 1927, which was to shape the character of the Maoist regime that emerged from the 1949 revolution.

After graduating in history from the University of Geneva in 1985 and holding university positions in London and Hong Kong, Dikötter became a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University—the archetypal US institution for the manufacture of Cold War anti-communism. There, he collaborates with such figures as H.R. McMaster, who served as Trump’s first-term national security adviser, and right-wing British historian Niall Ferguson.

What academic critics have pointed out in relation to his previous books—an absence of historical context or careful analysis, use of unreliable data, a lack of interest in or understanding of mass movements, a tabloid prose style and archival selections to fit pre-determined conclusions—certainly holds true of his latest book.

*Red Dawn*’s explanation of “how communism conquered a quarter of humanity” involves an obvious contradiction that Dikötter cannot resolve. On the one hand, Dikötter, based on his archival research, makes the following claim: “What becomes abundantly clear in one document after another is how marginal the Communist Party was in the history of China from its foundation in 1921 to the end of the Second World War in 1945.”<sup>[1]</sup>

The question arises: if the role of the Communist Party was so negligible, how could it have come to power in 1949? His answer is as crude as the rest of his argument: “The key word is violence, and a willingness to inflict it. Communism was never popular in China, no more so than in Finland or in the United States, and it was brought to the population at the barrel of a gun,” he declares.<sup>[2]</sup>

Dikötter fills page after page with accounts of Communist brutality drawn from its political enemies and torn out of context: Foreign diplomats, military officers and spies determined to protect and further imperialist interests, hide their intrigues and justify their crimes. Businessmen, missionaries and landlords give horror-filled accounts of the struggles of workers and peasants. Lurid stories about “bloodthirsty Communists” taken from the yellow press in China and echoed in the international media. All this provides the grist for his mill.

Insofar as Dikötter picks over the archives of the Stalinist Chinese Communist Party, it is to select bits and pieces to underscore the party’s insignificance, its vicious internal purges, its reliance on violence and its dependence on aid from the Soviet Union—in other words, his own preconceptions.

In his review in the *Financial Times*, Sergey Radchenko, who is clearly sympathetic to Dikötter, observes that “he recounts the story of the CCP’s rise as a non-ending series of crimes, some very meticulously described. Numbers... numbers... someone gets shot. Numbers... numbers... someone gets buried alive. Numbers... numbers... someone gets their head smashed by a rock. Numbers... numbers... someone gets eaten. Voilà, behold the dawn of communism.”<sup>[3]</sup>

However, violence, in and of itself, explains nothing. Throughout the period, China was embroiled in war—civil conflict and war with Japan. The question to be asked and answered is: who carried out the violence, and what class interests did it serve? The violence of the oppressors to maintain their exploitation and that of the oppressed fighting for their basic rights are not equivalent. Dikötter clearly sides with the former. Moreover, the willingness to inflict violence does not explain why one side wins a war, or a civil war in the case of China, and the other is defeated. Nor can it explain why the Stalinist CCP came to power in 1949, rather than 1939 or 1929.

## The formation of the Chinese Communist Party

To pull apart every falsehood, half-truth, flaw and evasion in *Red Dawn over China* is not possible in a review such as this—that would take a volume at least as large as the book itself. But it is necessary to critically examine Dikötter's treatment of the key turning points in China's history during the period covered by the book.

In less than 40 years, China was convulsed not by one, but three revolutions—the toppling of the Manchu dynasty in 1911, the Second Chinese Revolution of 1925-27, and the Third Chinese Revolution in 1949.

Dikötter barely touches on the overthrow of the imperial dynasty and the establishment of a Chinese republic. Sun Yat-sen, the first republican president and founder of the bourgeois Kuomintang (KMT) or Nationalist Party, was rapidly pushed aside as rival warlords, in league with the major imperialist powers, divided up the country.

It was the inability of the Chinese bourgeoisie to unite China, to end imperialist oppression or to address the pressing social needs of workers and peasants that fed the intellectual and political ferment out of which the Chinese Communist Party arose in the aftermath of World War I and the October Revolution in Russia in 1917.

Dikötter's account of the CCP's founding is driven by his political prejudices. "Communism was never popular in China," he tells his readers. The October Revolution in Russia he dismisses as "a coup," but one that nevertheless inexplicably "sent shockwaves through Europe and beyond." In China, however, unlike in Europe at the end of World War I, "no workers appeared on the streets."<sup>[4]</sup>

While there might not have been thousands of workers on the streets waving red flags and espousing Communism, a mass anti-imperialist movement developed rapidly after World War I. It was driven by opposition to Japan's demand to take over Shandong province and the continued presence of "concessions" or enclaves in major cities like Shanghai, Canton and Beijing controlled by the major imperialist powers.

Great expectations surrounded the post-war Versailles Conference, as many Chinese hoped that the major powers would support the return of Shandong, which had been under German control before the war, to China. Bitter disappointment at the decision to hand Shandong to Japan erupted in a mass protest by thousands of students in Beijing on May 4, 1919—a movement that rapidly spread to other cities with protests, strikes and a boycott of Japanese goods.

The May Fourth Movement was heavily influenced by the ideas of the New Culture Movement, which contended that ending China's subjugation required the modernisation of all aspects of society based on democratic ideals and the scientific advances in Europe and the United States. While it had many diverse strands, the most radical and far-sighted layers in the May Fourth Movement were drawn to Marxism and Bolshevism, inspired by the Russian Revolution.

For Dikötter, the founding of the Communist Party was all the result of intrigues by Communist agents and money from the Soviet Union. Representatives of the Third International or Comintern in China certainly and importantly assisted, but without the radicalisation already underway they would have failed to achieve anything. Dikötter ridicules its founding congress on July 23, 1921 as just a dozen delegates who "squabbled over numerous issues." Yet the party was to prove a powerful pole of attraction in the revolutionary upheavals that were soon to follow.<sup>[5]</sup>

For Dikötter, there was no revolutionary situation in China between 1925 and 1927. Except where unavoidable, the mass movement of workers and peasants is simply written out of his book. Questions of revolutionary strategy and tactics and Stalin's reactionary role are of no consequence. As a result, Dikötter's account lacks coherence or logic as it skips from one event to the next. The chief protagonist is Kuomintang (KMT) leader Chiang Kai-shek, who the Chinese bourgeoisie came to regard as their saviour from Communism and the rebellious masses. His crimes, and those of the imperialist powers, are covered up and minimized.

What happened was far more complex. In 1922, the Comintern directed the Chinese Communist Party to join the KMT and work within its ranks. Moscow provided money, arms and advisers to the KMT and established the Whampoa Military Academy to train its officers.

Trotsky, alone in the Politburo, opposed the decision to enter the bourgeois KMT. Stalin turned what had initially been justified as a temporary step towards building an independent party into a long-term policy, which, as Trotsky warned, proved fatal for the revolution and the Communist Party. The fight for the CCP's political independence was bound up with the struggle by Trotsky and the Left Opposition in Moscow against the Stalinist bureaucracy that subordinated the interests of the working class to the preservation of its privileges and power under the reactionary banner of Socialism in One Country.

In his *Theory of Permanent Revolution*, first developed in 1905, Trotsky established that the bourgeoisie in countries of belated capitalist development, such as Russia, was organically incapable of carrying out the basic democratic tasks of the classic bourgeois revolutions of Europe and America, including sweeping land reform. Those tasks necessarily fell to the proletariat, leading the peasantry in a revolutionary struggle for power as an integral component of the struggle for socialism internationally.

The *Theory of Permanent Revolution* foresaw the essential lines of development of the revolutionary upheavals in Russia in 1917 and provided the theoretical basis for the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks in the October Revolution. The Russian Revolution was a positive verification of Trotsky's theory; the tragic outcome of the Second Chinese Revolution was to verify it in the negative.

The anti-imperialist ferment expressed in the May Fourth Movement intensified into a nationwide upsurge in mid-1925. On May 30, British police shot and killed 12 people protesting the murder of a worker in a Japanese-owned factory in Shanghai. A general strike paralysed the city, and the mass movement spread rapidly. By one estimate, 400,000 workers took part in some 135 strikes.

In Canton, a huge protest took place on June 23, 1925, which marched toward the city's foreign concession area. British and French troops fired on the crowds with machine guns, killing 52. A general strike and boycott of British goods was declared and 100,000 workers walked out of the neighbouring British colony of Hong Kong. The strike by a quarter of a million workers shut down foreign businesses in both cities and lasted 15 months. It marked the onset of the Second Chinese Revolution.

After Sun Yat-sen's death in March 1925, a bitter power struggle had erupted inside the Kuomintang centred on the "left" Wang Ching-wei, who was the party and governmental leader in Canton, and Chiang Kai-shek, who headed the Whampoa Military Academy and had the support of the party's anti-communist right wing. On March 20, 1926, Chiang seized control of the KMT and its government in a military coup, declared martial law, sidelined the "left" KMT leadership and detained Communist leaders and Soviet advisers.

In the next few months, Chiang, as head of the government and army,

consolidated a military dictatorship. Strikes and peasant revolts were ruthlessly suppressed, including the long-running Canton-Hong Kong general strike. Communists could remain in the KMT but were barred from holding leading positions and compelled to advocate the bourgeois liberal ideology of Sun Yat-sen. Stalin ordered the Communist Party to remain inside the KMT, all but crippled politically and organisationally inside a bourgeois party.

Having gained control of the KMT, Chiang launched the Northern Expedition in July 1926—a military campaign against warlords who dominated northern China. Dikötter recounts the Northern Expedition as a series of military triumphs for Chiang, for which the CCP was not a help but a blight. The book denounces the Communists for encouraging “mobs to loot and burn the property of wealthy merchants and landowners” and attack “foreigners as agents of imperialism.”<sup>[6]</sup>

In reality, without the support of the Communist Party, Chiang could not have postured in front of the masses as their liberator and the Northern Expedition would have been a complete failure—one warlord battling others. The uprisings of workers and peasants instigated by the CCP’s cadres not only prepared the ground for the arrival of the KMT’s troops, but in some cases drove out the local warlord in advance. That is why, for the time being, Chiang allowed the Communist Party to remain inside the KMT under his direction—something Dikötter never explains, because to do so would undermine his absurd claim that the CCP was always politically marginal.

### Chiang’s massacre in Shanghai

Chiang’s bloody reckoning with the Communist Party came in Shanghai. In advance of his arrival, the CCP instigated an armed insurrection backed by a general strike on March 21, 1927, which put China’s most industrialised city under the total control of the General Labour Union, with the exception of the foreign concessions.

But as Chiang conspired with the city’s businessmen and Triad gangs to deliver a deadly blow, Stalin disarmed the proletariat politically and materially, ordering workers to bury their arms and welcome Chiang’s troops into the city. In a notorious speech on April 5, he declared that “Chiang Kai-shek is submitting to discipline.” Just a week later, April 12, Chiang’s troops entered Shanghai and carried out a bloodbath. Hundreds of workers and communists were savagely butchered and the city’s Communist Party and General Labour Union shattered.

Dikötter downplays both the political significance and extent of the carnage in Shanghai, ridiculing “popular lore [that] would claim for decades to come, a massacre of thousands of revolutionaries.”<sup>[7]</sup> The exact number killed in Shanghai on April 12 is obviously unknown as Chiang’s forces sought to cover up their dirty work. But in the two weeks following, the French scholar Marie-Claire Bergère estimates the death toll of workers and CCP members at more than 5,000, either shot or disappeared, presumed executed.<sup>[8]</sup>

What is indisputable is that in the reign of “white terror” that followed, thousands of communists and workers were murdered in cities throughout China under Chiang’s control. Politically, it was a disastrous defeat for the working class for which Stalin was centrally responsible and was a major blow in the Second Chinese Revolution.

For his part, Stalin declared his policy had been completely correct. He had proclaimed the bourgeois Kuomintang to be a revolutionary bloc of four classes—the progressive wing of the bourgeoisie, the urban petty bourgeoisie, the peasantry and proletariat—welding together in the struggle against imperialism as the bourgeois democratic stage of the revolution. The second stage—the struggle for socialism—was condemned to the distant

future. It amounted to a resurrection of the Menshevik two-stage theory that had been utterly discredited by the Russian Revolution.

In his crushing critique of Stalin’s perspective, Trotsky replied: “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.”<sup>[9]</sup>

Dikötter scoffs at Trotsky’s position as “a purely Communist programme to be carried out just by Communists,” that was “an improbable scheme, far removed from the reality on the ground.” Improbable? Only if one completely discounts the significance of the seizure of power by the proletariat in Shanghai and the continuing revolutionary movement reverberating in China.<sup>[10]</sup>

Stalin, who Dikötter declares was “more pragmatic than Trotsky,” prepared a second edition of the disaster by ordering the CCP to support the “left” KMT government in Wuhan of Wang Ching-wei. Two Communist Party leaders were appointed as government ministers tasked with reining in the continuing workers’ strikes and peasant uprisings. Stalin insisted that they remain in the government even as it bowed to warlords who were gunning down peasants who had begun to seize and redistribute land.

Having exploited the CCP to assist in the suppression of the mass movement, Wang, as Trotsky had warned, turned on the Communist Party and its supporters. On July 15, 1927, Wang formally ordered all CCP members to quit the KMT or face severe punishment, then crushed any resistance by workers and peasants. By early August, the two wings of the Kuomintang—the “left” in Wuhan and the right-wing under Chiang in Nanking—were exchanging congratulatory telegrams.

To cover up the catastrophes he had authored, Stalin ordered the battered, disoriented, and demoralised CCP to stage a series of ill-fated adventures. These culminated in the Canton uprising on December 11-13, timed to coincide with the opening of the 15th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and preparations for the expulsion and exile of the Left Opposition. The crushing of the Canton Commune marked the end of the Second Chinese Revolution and opened the door for the counter-revolution that followed.

### Dikötter on the “Red Terror”

In the first two chapters, Dikötter glosses over the Second Chinese Revolution, a fundamental turning point in modern Chinese history that had a profound impact on the future course of events. The remaining six chapters of *Red China* are largely devoted to accounts of Stalinist violence.

Five of those chapters trace the movements and the battles involving the various CCP commanders and armies as the Communist Party tore itself away from the working class and retreated to more isolated and backward areas of China to conduct guerrilla warfare; its attempts to create secure base areas—so-called Soviets; the disastrous Long March north during which Mao Zedong assumes party leadership; the second CCP alliance with Chiang Kai-shek; and the final period of the war against Japan.

Dikötter makes not the slightest pretence of carefully weighing the evidence for and against his litany of horror tales—who carried them out, the extent and reasons for the violence, or even if they happened at all.

Peasant rebellions have a long history in China and frequently meted out rough justice to the oppressors, which the CCP no doubt encouraged and participated in. It is beyond the scope of this review to dissect each incident in detail.

Chapter 3, entitled “Red Terror (1927-51),” provides a telling example of Dikötter’s unscrupulous methodology. The opening section provides a sensational account in tabloid style of the horrors of the short-lived Hailufeng Soviet established in November 1927 in the wake of failed peasant uprisings ordered by Moscow.

The first rural soviet and its leader, Peng Pai, have been the subject of academic study since Shinkichi Eto published the first English-language work in *China Quarterly* in 1961-62. Fernando Galbiati’s substantial biography, *P’eng P’ai and the Hai-Lu-Feng Soviet*, appeared in 1985 along with Robert Marks’s book, *Rural Revolution in South China: Peasants and the Making of History in Haifeng County, 1570–1930* in 1984, which studied the county’s oppressive conditions and violent peasant outbursts.

None of these works supports the thesis that Peng Pai, out of sheer bloodlust, initiated a violent rampage that claimed the lives of thousands, so Dikötter relies overwhelmingly on contemporaneous sources overtly hostile to the Communist Party. After citing CCP documents reporting some 50 landlords killed, the numbers quickly escalate.

At the Soviet’s inauguration on November 21, Dikötter declares: “Each of the 300 official delegates was enjoined to ‘kill at least ten reactionaries’ and lead the peasants to ‘kill ten more,’ amounting to 6,000 altogether.” But that is not enough. He claims that Peng Pai suggested that villagers should exterminate 40 percent of the population, not only landlords and political opponents, but “the incurably sick, prostitutes, priests, soothsayers, the blind, the lame and the elderly.” It should be noted that if this had actually been carried out, it would imply, based on a population of 400,000, that 160,000 people were slaughtered.<sup>[11]</sup>

Dikötter’s chief source for these bloodcurdling statements is an anti-communist diatribe in Chinese: *Record of the Communist Catastrophe in Haifeng and Lufeng*, written by Chen Xiaobai, who fled Haifeng, published in 1932 as KMT propaganda. Dikötter provides no other corroboration for the claim that 40 percent of the population or anyone other than outright political opponents and oppressive landlords and their henchmen were targeted.

That does not stop Dikötter from proceeding with his harrowing tale of Communist savagery drawn from sensational press accounts of the day—“The Fiends of Swabue” [*North-China Herald*]; “Outrages by Red Troops” [*South China Morning Post*]; “Communist Reign of Terror” [*North-China Herald*]. In addition to Chen’s propaganda, he cites “Communism in South China: The Hai-Lu-Feng Soviet”, a highly coloured report by American diplomat Jay Huston, based on sources that can no longer be corroborated.

The number of alleged executions continues to climb. “By the end December,” Dikötter writes, “one estimate put the death toll at 10,000, based on figures compiled for individual towns and villages where the body count was often in the hundreds, sometimes as high as 600 or 700.” Far from being an objective survey, the source is the notoriously anti-communist, *North-China Herald*. He concludes several pages of gory detail by a French consul in Canton—again hardly a disinterested source—who “was estimating that 25,000 people had perished under the iron hand of the Hailufeng Soviet.”<sup>[12]</sup>

Page after page of *Red Dawn over China* employs the same methodology. The book is not a work of scholarship, but a recycling of the anti-communist propaganda of the day dressed up as fact. Given the lack of direct quotes from sources, it is impossible to know how much of the book is verified by these clearly biased sources and how much is simply Dikötter’s purple prose.

Executions clearly took place in the Hailufeng Soviet but there is no way of accurately verifying the numbers. Communist Party estimates vary from 500-plus landlords and local bullies to 1,686 for Haifeng County. Moreover, Dikötter simply ignores the context. The executions took place amid a wave of White Terror that began with Chiang Kai-shek’s massacre in Shanghai. Local officials, landlords and their thugs were not passive bystanders.

It is telling that Dikötter refers only once, in disparaging terms, to *The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution* by Harold Isaacs, an American journalist in China who was won to Trotskyism, and whose book remains one of the most authoritative works on the Second Chinese Revolution, 1925-27 and its immediate aftermath. Isaacs documents the extent of the White Terror:

For the record, there are only partial estimates and incomplete figures culled from official announcements and from the daily press. From April to December 1927, according to one investigation, there were 37,985 known dead and 32,316 known political prisoners. Between January and August 1928, 27,699 were formally condemned to death and more than 17,000 were imprisoned. At the end of 1930, the Chinese Red Cross estimated a total of 140,000 had been killed or died in prison. In 1931, a study of available cities of six provinces established that 38,778 had been executed as enemies of the regime.<sup>[13]</sup>

It is not the intention of this review to justify the crimes of Stalinism or whitewash its use of violence, which included vicious internal purges. The CCP took its cue from Stalin’s persecution of opponents that culminated in the notorious Moscow Show Trials in 1936-37, in which Trotskyists were the chief target. Hundreds of thousands of oppositionists were executed in the Soviet Union. A number of Trotskyists in China suffered a similar fate, either directly at the hands of the Stalinists or indirectly through their betrayal by the CCP to the Kuomintang’s police state apparatus or imperialist police.

However, Dikötter’s claim that the CCP ruled through violence alone is simply false. Without the active support of layers of the poor peasantry eager for land, the CCP and the Red Armies formed in backward areas of China after 1927 simply could not have resisted the annihilation campaigns by Chiang Kai-shek’s larger and better-equipped military forces. Its policies on land reform, while inconsistent, along with the suppression of landlords and their KMT backers, encouraged the resistance of the peasantry to their oppressive conditions.

Between 1930 and 1934, Chiang carried out five major military “encirclement” campaigns in a bid to crush the Jiangxi Soviet and annihilate the CCP. While offering little resistance to the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931, accommodating to Tokyo and suppressing anti-Japanese protests, Chiang mobilised hundreds of thousands of troops in his bid to annihilate the CCP. The first four campaigns failed.

The fifth encirclement campaign in 1933-34, involving a million troops, was systematically prepared with the assistance of the German military mission to China. On the advice of General Hans von Seeckt, former commander-in-chief of the Reichswehr, Chiang built blockhouses linked by roads and used scorched earth tactics to completely isolate the CCP forces. Vastly outnumbered and outgunned, the Communist armies broke through the cordon in October 1934 and headed north, a march that became known as the Long March.

It should be noted that Dikötter fails to mention Chiang’s ties with Nazi Germany and his admiration for fascism. In a notorious speech in 1935, Chiang declared: “Can fascism save China? We answer: yes. Fascism is what China now most needs. In fascism, the organisation, the spirit, and

the activities must all be militarised.”<sup>[14]</sup> It was only after Nazi Germany sided with Japan, after it launched a full-scale invasion of China in 1937, that Chiang’s relations with Berlin ruptured.

Stalin’s response to the Japanese invasion was to politically subordinate the CCP to Chiang Kai-shek, the butcher of Shanghai, for a second time in the so-called anti-Japanese United Front. Its origins lay in the Comintern’s Seventh World Congress in July 1935 that abandoned the adventurism of the Third Period line for the opportunism of the Popular Front—the subjugation of the working class to the bourgeoisie that had proved fatal in China in 1927.

The Communist Party was compelled to accept all of Chiang Kai-shek’s terms: abolition of the Red Army and incorporation into government armies under the control of the Military Affairs Commission; dissolution of the Soviet Republic; cessation of all Communist propaganda; and suspension of the class struggle. Of its own volition, the CCP declared an end to the confiscation of the landlords’ land, as proof that it was not promoting the class struggle. In return, the CCP was assigned a garrison area around Yen’an in northern China and received regular subsidies from Chiang’s government in Nanking throughout the war.

### The Third Chinese Revolution

Dikötter only addresses what his book purports to be about—How Communism Conquered a Quarter of Humanity—in the final chapter of his book, covering the period from 1945 to the overthrow of KMT rule in 1949. He does so by denying that a revolution took place at all.

In an interview published on the Wire China website, he dismisses the work of other historians, declaring: “There is a conviction among so many of us that there must have been social, economic, political reasons for a revolution to take place. Revolutions don’t just happen for nothing. But my answer to that is: no, there wasn’t a social revolution. There was a military conquest.”<sup>[15]</sup>

At one stroke, Dikötter pushes aside the elementary requirements of historiography. In writing about what were tumultuous and complex events in China leading up to the 1949 revolution, he makes no serious examination of the major political parties and their programs, the impact of imperialist exploitation, nor the economic backwardness and appalling poverty that repeatedly drove masses of workers and peasants into struggle.

The internal rot of the corrupt KMT, its inability to resolve China’s profound economic and financial crisis following the end of World War II, its repression of the post-war upsurge of strikes and protests, the extreme social tensions that were also reflected in the ranks of its conscript armies—all this is virtually absent from the account.

The collapse of the Chiang Kai-shek dictatorship is treated as a disconnected series of military defeats at the hands of the Communist armies. The transformation of the CCP from its supposedly marginal existence into a party commanding millions of troops is put down to coercion and its victories to unmitigated cruelty and violence.

Blame for Chiang’s defeat is sheeted home to US President Harry Truman and his administration failing to provide military aid and attempting to coerce the KMT into a coalition government with the CCP. Dikötter’s arguments recall the right-wing attacks on Truman, who was held responsible for the “loss of China” to the “Communists”. Senator Joseph McCarthy, who was to preside over the anti-Communist witch-hunt in the 1950s, rode to prominence in this crusade.

In reality, US imperialism was pursuing the same policy in China as elsewhere to restabilise global capitalism in the immediate aftermath of World War II. With Europe and much of Asia in ruins, the US and its

allies confronted insurgent working classes, arms in hand. Stalin was instrumental in betraying these revolutionary movements. In France and Italy, where bourgeois parties had no political credibility, Moscow directed the Communist Parties to enter coalition governments in which Communist ministers disarmed partisan fighters and suppressed strikes. Having stabilised capitalist rule, they were dismissed from office.

That was also Truman’s plan in China. Immediately after Japan’s surrender, Mao, at Stalin’s direction, had already personally engaged in weeks of talks with Chiang and his representatives over a coalition government. For the following two years, amid continuing efforts to form a coalition, the CCP abided by the terms of the United Front—no class struggle, no land reform—even as strikes and protests multiplied against the KMT dictatorship amid inflation and rampant corruption. Despite the political brake applied by the CCP, a revolutionary ferment was developing. In his report delivered to the Fourth International in 1951, Chinese Trotskyist Peng Shuzhi explained:

The first period immediately after the war, from September 1945 to the end of 1946, marked a considerable revival and growth of the mass movement in China. In this period the working masses in the great cities, with Shanghai in the forefront, first brought forward their demands for a sliding-scale of wages, for the right to organize trade unions, against the freezing of wages, etc. They universally and continuously engaged in strikes and demonstrations.... The students played a notable role, representing the petty bourgeoisie in general, in large-scale protest, strikes and demonstrations in the big cities... under the banners and slogans demanding democracy and peace.<sup>[16]</sup>

Truman’s plans for a coalition government in China collapsed in 1947 not because the CCP was unwilling but because Chiang rejected the proposal and launched military offensives to annihilate Mao and the Red Army. Even then, the CCP held back while Chiang’s armies occupied its base area in Yen’an in April, and the KMT issued a warrant for Mao’s arrest in June and promulgated a mobilisation decree to suppress revolts in July. It was not until October that the CCP published a manifesto calling for the overthrow of the KMT dictatorship and the building of a New China.

As Peng explained, the KMT regime was literally disintegrating, yet the CCP relied exclusively on its peasant-based armies. While breaking the United Front with Chiang, Mao’s New China program was a continuation of the Stalinist two-stage policy that subordinated the working class to the “progressive” national bourgeoisie and put off socialist measures to the future. In its quest for bourgeois allies, the CCP made no attempt to organise proletarian insurrections in the cities but sought to block any such rebellion. That did not mean there were no strikes or other forms of political unrest—China was a nation in revolt against a hated, oppressive and corrupt dictatorship. As Peng outlined in his report:

After the surrender of Japanese imperialism, Chiang Kai-shek’s tyranny, corruption and inefficiency reach a climax. First, in the name of taking over the ‘properties of the enemy and the traitors,’ the militarists and bureaucrats stole almost all the public property to fill their own purses, and indulged themselves in extravagant luxury and dissipation. At the same time, using the pretext of proceeding with civil war, they extracted food from the peasants and imposed conscription upon them, did their best to squeeze and to oppress...

The financial base of Chiang’s government had already been

exhausted in the course of the war... After peace was announced, the pace of inflation advanced from geometric progression to lightning speed, terminating in the collapse of the 'gold yuan' and the unprecedented economic chaos at the end of 1948.

All commerce and industry halted and disintegrated, and the living standards of the various layers among the middle and lower classes (including all the middle and lower functionaries in the government institutions) cast them into the pit of despair. Driven by starvation, the workers rose up in a universal strike wave (there were 200,000 workers on strike in Shanghai alone). Plundering of rice took place everywhere...

If the CCP had called upon the workers and the masses in the big cities to rise in rebellion and overthrow the regime, it would have been as easy as knocking down rotten wood. But Mao's party merely gave orders to the people to quietly wait for their 'liberation' by the 'People's Liberation Army'.<sup>[17]</sup>

Ignoring the immense economic and social crisis, Dikötter focuses entirely on the military campaigns and mainly on the battles in Manchuria fought and won by Communist forces, which were reorganised in October 1947 into the more centralised People's Liberation Army. By November 1948, the PLA controlled all of Manchuria, but that left the remaining vast territories in China still under Chiang's nominal control.

The final few pages of *Red Dawn over China* are devoted to a desultory description of the implosion of the KMT regime as PLA armies swept south, encountering little or no resistance. What Dikötter describes as a wave of defeatism and panic fails to explain the collapse of the Nationalist armies, in which officers and conscripts alike no longer viewed the Chiang dictatorship as worth fighting and dying for. Nor can he explain the rapid expansion of the PLA forces to encompass millions of troops, and their fighting capacity, except by insinuating that peasants were dragooned.

Confronted with what was plainly a revolutionary upheaval throughout China, Dikötter appears to be lost for words. As Chiang's armies go from one defeat to another in rapid succession until Canton falls "with scarcely more than a quiet sigh," he is incapable of providing any credible explanation. His thesis that the 1949 Chinese Revolution was not a revolution is discredited by events that he barely describes. His book fizzles out without a conclusion.

The revolution was a contradictory phenomenon that his one-word explanation—violence—does not begin to encompass. It threw off imperialist oppression, unified the country and swept away centuries of cultural backwardness. It was not simply the military victories of Mao's armies but a nationwide revolt that brought the brutal, corrupt Chiang Kai-shek dictatorship to an end.

The 1949 Chinese Revolution is justifiably regarded by Chinese workers and youth as a huge step forward. In response to the social aspirations of the revolutionary movement of workers and peasants, the CCP was compelled to eliminate much of what was socially and culturally backward in Chinese society, including polygamy, child betrothal, foot binding and concubinage. Illiteracy was largely abolished and life expectancy increased significantly. The perennial flooding of the great rivers that caused death and destruction was minimised. Extensive land reform took place.

But the regime that emerged in Beijing was shaped by the defeats of the Second Chinese Revolution, which led to the Stalinist degeneration of the Communist Party, which was based on predominantly peasant armies rather than the proletariat. The bureaucratic state apparatus, whose leading strata were drawn from the Red Army generals and officers, provided no democratic mechanisms for the working class or rural masses. It was not until the Korean War of 1950-53 threatened imperialist intervention in

China that the CCP nationalised all industry and finance, instituting bureaucratic planning along the lines of the Soviet Stalinists. The Trotskyist movement characterised the People's Republic of China as a deformed workers' state that rested on nationalised property relations but in which the working class had no political say.

The Stalinist perspective of "Socialism in One Country," overlaid with Chinese nationalism, resulted in one crisis after another, as the regime sought solutions to the immense economic and social problems it confronted within this narrow nationalist framework. Less than a quarter century after the People's Republic was proclaimed, Mao held his meeting with US President Nixon in February 1972 and accommodated to US imperialism. This set the geopolitical framework for capitalist restoration and the transformation of China into a huge cheap labour platform for foreign capital. The remarkable economic growth that resulted has only confronted the autocratic CCP regime with problems for which it has no solution: vast disparities between rich and poor, a halving of growth rates and a looming war with US imperialism, which regards China as the chief threat to its global dominance.

If the theoretically impoverished and politically reactionary pages of *Red Dawn over China* are any guide, Dikötter's other books on China can shed no light on its complex history nor its contemporary problems.

Frank Dikötter, *Red Dawn over China: How Communism Conquered a Quarter of Humanity*, Bloomsbury, 2026, p. xiii [all page references are to the Kindle edition].

Ibid. p. xvii.

"*Red Dawn over China: How Communism Conquered a Quarter of Humanity—brutality behind the propaganda*", *Financial Times*, February 12, 2026

Dikötter, pp. 4-5.

Ibid. p. 15.

Ibid. p. xviii.

Ibid. p. 61.

Marie-Claire Bergère, *Shanghai: China's Gateway to Modernity* (Stanford, 2009)

*Leon Trotsky on China*, Monad Press, 1978 p. 161.

Dikötter, p. 64.

Ibid. p. 74.

Ibid. pp.75-6.

Harold R. Isaacs, *Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution*, Haymarket Books, 2010, pp. 280-81.

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P'eng Shu-tse, *The Chinese Communist Party in Power*, Monad Press, 1980, pp. 84-5.

Ibid. pp. 74-75.

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[1] Frank Dikötter, *Red Dawn over China: How Communism Conquered a Quarter of Humanity*, Bloomsbury, 2026, p. xiii [all page references are to the Kindle edition].

[2] Ibid. p. xvii.

[3] "*Red Dawn over China: How Communism Conquered a Quarter of Humanity—brutality behind the propaganda*", *Financial Times*, February 12, 2026

[4] Dikötter, pp. 4-5.

[5] Ibid. p. 15.

[6] Ibid. p. xviii.

[7] Ibid. p. 61.

[8] Marie-Claire Bergère, *Shanghai: China's Gateway to Modernity* (Stanford, 2009)

[9] *Leon Trotsky on China*, Monad Press, 1978 p. 161.

[10] Dikötter, p. 64.

[11] Ibid. p. 74.

[12] Ibid. pp.75-6.

[13] Harold R. Isaacs, *Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution*, Haymarket Books, 2010, pp. 280-81.

[14] Quoted in Lloyd Eastman, *The Nationalist Era in China 1927-1949*.

[15] Jonathan Chatwin, “Frank Dikötter on the Chinese Communist Party’s Troubled Early Years”, *The Wire China*, February 20, 2026.

[16] P’eng Shu-tse, *The Chinese Communist Party in Power*, Monad Press, 1980, pp. 84-5.

[17] Ibid. pp. 74-75.



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