

The tragedy of the 1925-1927 Chinese Revolution

Part 1

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Below is the first part of a lecture delivered at a summer school of the Socialist Equality Party in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in August 2007. (Click here for part 2 and 3)

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 Ching-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 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

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



Chen Duxiu

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 Dazhao

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 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, 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 young 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.

To be continued

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