

Trotskyism versus Stalinism in the Chinese revolution

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was an offspring of the Russian October Revolution. Ideologically and materially, the CCP owed its birth and growth to the aid of the Russian communists who had already achieved victory in their own revolution.

Without this aid, a communist organisation might still have emerged in China in the early 1920s, but it is unlikely that it would have grown at the same speed; nor would it have been capable of playing as powerful a role in the revolution of 1925-27.

But this outside aid not only promoted the emergence and growth of the CCP and sped the development of the revolution; it also — irony of history — became one of the main causes of the tragic defeats suffered by the CCP and the Chinese revolution.

For an explanation of this paradox we must look into the nature of the aid, particularly the ideological aid, the directions from the Communist International.

No strategy for the countries of the East was advanced by the Comintern until its second Congress. Then, in July-August 1920, the leaders of the world communist movement, through Lenin, worked out their theses on the national and colonial questions.

The policy recommended was "...support bourgeois-democratic national movements in the colonial and backward countries only on the condition that, in these countries, the elements of future proletarian parties, which will be communist not only in name, are brought together and trained to understand their special tasks, ie. those of the struggle against the bourgeois-democratic movements within their own nations.

"The Communist International must establish temporary relations and even unions with the revolutionary movements in the colonies and backward countries without amalgamating with them, but preserving the independent character of the proletarian movement, even though it be still in its embryonic form."

These Leninist principles could not be carried out under Lenin's personal guidance because of his illness and subsequent death. When the revolution broke out in China in 1925 (and even earlier during its brewing), the leadership of the Comintern and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union had already fallen into other hands (first the Stalin-Zinoviev bloc, later the Stalin and Bukharin faction). And a new chapter had begun in the history of the Russian revolution, in which conservatism was replacing revolutionary enthusiasm, "socialism in one country" replacing "world revolution" and a narrow-minded arbitrary bureaucracy had emerged and consolidated itself. In these circumstances, the new leadership monopolised the direc-

Wang Fan-hsi, a veteran of Chinese communism and one of the founders of Chinese Trotskyism, surveys the debate in the communist movement on strategy and tactics in the 1920s. This is part I of an article written as an introduction to the German edition of 'Leon Trotsky on China'

tion of the Chinese revolution, adopting a line directly opposite to Lenin's. In defence of the October tradition in general, and Lenin's strategy in relation to China in particular, Trotsky and his co-thinkers rose to wage a struggle with the aim of securing a change of course, but ended in failure.

The defeat of the Russian opposition and the defeat of the Chinese revolution were closely and reciprocally related. The more evident the bankruptcy of Stalin's China policy became, the more violent suppression the opposition suffered. When the revolution was brought to a catastrophe in the fall of 1927, the Trotskyist oppositionists were annihilated — first politically and then physically. Their views — completely confirmed by events in China — were suppressed, distorted and then tabooed.

In spite of the omnipotent Stalinist censorship, the documents have survived and the truth of the ideological contest can easily be established.

The first controversial question that arose before the outbreak of the revolution and continued to be argued about until its defeat was: whether or not the CCP should retain its independence. It is interesting to note that this first, and perhaps most important, controversy on a fundamental question of the Chinese revolution initially broke out not among the Russian or Comintern leadership, but

between the leaders of the young CCP on the one hand and the Comintern leadership on the other. This took place immediately after the CCP's second Congress, in July 1922.

The Founding Congress of the CCP, early in July 1921, did no more than proclaim a series of principles. It declared that the Chinese communists had determined to follow the example of their Russian comrades, to struggle for the establishment of a proletarian dictatorship in order to realise communist aims in China, and had decided to set up a Communist Party based on the organisational principles of the Bolsheviks in order to achieve that aim. No attempt was made to link the ultimate goal of communism to the realities of contemporary China, except for a decision by the CCP to devote itself to educating and organising the working class.

After a year of practical work, the second Congress (July 1922) decided on an entirely different approach. For the first time, it was proposed that they should tackle the questions of anti-imperialism, anti-feudal and national-democratic revolution, and the relationship between the CCP and the Guomindang (GMD), Sun Yat-sen's bourgeois nationalist party (cf p.660 in *Leon Trotsky on China*).

On 10 June, a month before the Congress, the CCP issued its 'First Manifesto on the Current Situation', which declared "the urgent task of the proletariat is to act jointly with the democratic party to establish a united front of democratic revolution to struggle for the overthrow of the military and for the organisation of a real democratic government...Of all the political parties existing in China, only the GMD can be characterised as a revolutionary party." (Brandt et al, *A Documentary History*, pp.58 & 62).

Congress itself described the attitude of the CCP towards the "national revolution" in a special resolution as follows: "...we are of the opinion that the national revolution is advantageous not only to the bourgeoisie, but also to the proletariat. We should unite in fact with all revolutionary parties and form a united front with the GMD...At the same time we must tell them [the workers and peasants] that such a united front is not to make sacrifices for the sake of the GMD, but for the sake of securing a temporary freedom. Thus, the proletariat must not forget, in course of struggle, to maintain their own independent organisation." (Warren Kuo's *Chung-kun Shih-lun*, Vol.I, p.82)

That was clearly in line with Lenin's theses. But the Comintern leadership did not approve the line adopted by the second Congress of the CCP. By now the main concern of the Russian government and the Comintern was how to break the Soviet Union's diplomatic isolation in the Far East.



Chen Duxiu

From the time the Russians helped to establish a communist party, they had sent a series of representatives to Sun Yat-sen to sound out the possibility of friendly relations between China and Russia and of co-operation between the CCP and the GMD. First, G Voitinsky (autumn of 1920), then Maring (H Sneevliet) in the winter of 1921, and then S Dalin during the second Congress of the CCP went to see the GMD leaders with a proposal for a united front of revolutionary groups. Sun refused: instead he proposed that the members of the CCP and the Communist League of Youth join the GMD as individual members, and obey its programme and discipline.

Obviously under-estimating the potential strength of the newly-born CCP and over-estimating that of the GMD, Moscow showed its readiness to accept Sun Yat-sen's demands and decided to ask their Chinese comrades to do as Sun wished. Maring was then sent to China to push for such a decision. As we have seen, the CCP had already passed a resolution calling for a different form of co-operation with the GMD. Maring therefore demanded that the new CC of the CCP hold an emergency conference to discuss and accept the directive from the Comintern.

At the conference the five members of the CC unanimously refused to reconsider their decision. To join the GMD, argued Chen Duxiu, the general secretary of the CCP, was to confuse the class organisations and curb the Party's independent policy. As a result, the representative of the Comintern had to resort to international discipline and play on its tremendous prestige; and only then did the young Chinese communist leaders yield.

The question whether the CCP should have joined the GMD was among the first major causes of difference between Trotsky and Stalin. From 1923 Trotsky had opposed the CCP's entry into the GMD (see his letter to Shachtman, 1930). But he did not make his position public until 1926, because of the concessions — which he later admitted were a mistake — he made to the members of the Left Opposition (chiefly Radek) and to the Zinovievites in 1926 when the United Opposition was formed.

Only on 27 September 1926 did he openly reveal his opinion in his article 'The CCP and the GMD' (p.114). Even then his arguments were mild. He was still bound by the discipline of the United Opposition. On 7 May 1927, however, obviously under the impact of Chiang

Kai-Shek's April 12th coup in Shanghai, ignoring the constraints of that discipline, he launched his thunderous attack on the policy of abandoning the independent role of the CCP. (See *The Chinese Revolution and the Theses of Comrade Stalin*, p.170)

Zinoviev and his followers continued on this question until the eve of the "betrayal" of the "left" GMD in Wuhan, i.e. until 2 July 1927, when they issued a common document with Trotsky ('The New Stage of the Chinese Revolution') in which they called for the withdrawal of the CCP from the GMD. It was too late. By then it was no longer a question of whether to stay in or withdraw from the GMD, but of how the Chinese communists could survive under the GMD terror, and organise the resistance to it.

But the position of the Stalin-Bukharin faction was much worse. Even after Wang Jing-wei, the so-called "left" GMD leader, assassinated communists on a mass scale, the Chinese communists were still not allowed to abandon the GMD banner and ordered to continue "co-operation" with the GMD, which as a whole had turned against the CCP and its followers with fire and sword. The most preposterous policy of "fighting against the GMD under the banner of the GMD" was abandoned only several months later, with the tragic defeat of the Canton insurrection of 11 December 1927.

The difference between Trotsky on the one hand and Stalin and Bukharin (and to some extent Zinoviev and Radek) on the other on the question of relations with the GMD was a logical extension of the different views on the character of the GMD as a party.

The majority saw the GMD as "a bloc of proletariat, peasantry, urban petty-bourgeoisie and the national bourgeoisie" (The resolution of the 7th Plenum of the ECCI). Stalin at first (1925) called the GMD "a workers' and peasants' party" (*Problems of Leninism*, p.264), then in May 1927 he called it a "party of a bloc of several oppressed classes" ('Talk with students of the Sun Yat-sen University'). If the GMD was a party or a bloc in which workers and peasants predominated, then the CCP's entry into the GMD (according to the Stalinists' thinking) would certainly not prevent it from maintaining its independence, but would enable it to win more allies.

Trotsky had pointed out as far back as 1924 that Sun Yat-sen's ideology was bourgeois (see 'Perspectives and Tasks in the East'). He believed that "the definition" of the GMD as a workers' and peasants' party "has nothing in common with Marxism" (*The Chinese Revolution and the Theses of Comrade Stalin*, p.178). He argued that "to depict the GMD as a formless organisation committed to none is to distort the very meaning of the question. No matter how formless the GMD is at its periphery, its central apparatus has the revolutionary dictatorship firmly in hand" (p.202). So Trotsky asserted: "The GMD is a Party, and in the time of revolution it can be understood as a party, in the past period this party has not embodied the 'bloc of four classes', but the leading role of the bourgeoisie over the masses of the people, the proletariat and the Communist Party included" (p.227, emphasis in original).

The leadership of the CCP knew little about this difference of opinion. Ever since they had been forced to abandon their independent position and to join the GMD, they had worked hard to carry out the policy of unity. But on several occasions they (or rather some of them) had proposed to the Comintern a change in policy as they found the official line increasingly difficult to follow.

First, after Chiang Kai-shek's preemptive strike against the communists on 20 March 1926, and the CCP's capitulation to Chiang under pressure from the Comintern, Chen Duxiu, general secretary of the CCP, who had opposed the entry policy at and after the party's second Congress, now raised his opposition again and in a report to the Comintern gave it as his personal opinion "that co-operation with the GMD by means of joint work within it should be changed to co-operation from outside the GMD." ('Appeal to all the comrades of the CCP'). Chen's proposal was bitterly attacked by Bukharin in an article in *Pravda*.

Nearly four months later¹, the fourth CC of the CCP passed a resolution at its second Plenum 'On the Relations between the CCP and the GMD'. While not demanding immediate withdrawal from the GMD, it proposed five concrete measures to guarantee the independent activity of the CCP. These measures were sharply criticised in an editorial of the Communist International, which called for a thorough reversal of these wrong decisions².

Thus the CCP had revolted for a second time against the Comintern on the question of the GMD. A third revolt occurred after the anti-communist coup in Changsha in 21 May, 1927. Twice Chen Duxiu proposed withdrawing from the GMD at a meeting of the Politburo of the CCP. His proposals were rejected by the majority and by the representatives in attendance.

Finally, on 15 July 1927, he tendered his resignation as general secretary of the party on the grounds that the "International wishes us to carry out our own policy on the one hand, and does not allow us to withdraw from the GMD on the other. There is really no way out and I cannot continue my work."

Unfamiliar with each other's stated opinions, the views of Chen Duxiu and Trotsky coincided in the matter of the relationship between the CCP and the GMD. This was one of the main reasons why Chen and his close friends became Trotskyists immediately when they got access to literature of the Left Opposition in the autumn of 1929.

Stalin's GMD policy was theoretically based on the idea of the "bloc of four classes" which, in turn, was supported by the fact of imperialist oppression in China; while this oppression had not eliminated class antagonisms, according to Stalin, it had greatly weakened and modified them; it made necessary and possible the formation of an "all-national united front" and the GMD served exactly as the political expression of that united front.

To support his assertion that the Chinese bourgeoisie could and should occupy an important position in the united front, Stalin stressed the division of the

Chinese big bourgeoisie into two uncompromisingly opposite parts: national bourgeoisie and comprador bourgeoisie. "The former was anti-imperialist and the founder of the GMD, while the latter was pro-imperialist and it was and remains a sworn enemy of the GMD" (The third question in Stalin's Talk with Students of the Sun Yat-sen University).

As if anticipating such a conception of the national bourgeoisie, in July 1920, in his Report of the Commission on the National and Colonial Question at the second Congress of the Comintern, Lenin pointed out: "...A certain rapprochement has been brought about between the bourgeoisie of the exploiting countries and those of the colonial countries so that they very often even in the majority of cases, perhaps, where the bourgeoisie of the oppressed countries does support the national movement, it simultaneously works in harmony with the imperialist bourgeoisie, i.e. it joins the latter in fighting against the revolutionary movements and revolutionary classes."

In conformity with Lenin's teaching,

"The bourgeoisie participated in the national war as an internal brake, looking upon the worker and peasant masses with growing hostility and becoming ever readier to conclude a compromise with imperialism"

Trotsky repeatedly expressed his own opinions on the same question since 1925 and most systematically elaborated in his criticisms of Stalin's *Theses on the Chinese Revolution*. "It would further be profound naivete to believe that an abyss lies between the so-called comprador bourgeoisie, that is, the economic and political agency of foreign capital in China, and the so-called national bourgeoisie," he wrote.

"No, these two sections stand incomparably closer to each other than the bourgeoisie and the masses of workers and peasants. The bourgeoisie participated in the national war as an internal brake, looking upon the worker and peasant masses with growing hostility and becoming ever readier to conclude a compromise with imperialism" (pp.160-1).

Events completely confirmed this. These lines were written on 7 May 1927, twenty five days after Chiang Kai-shek, leader of the "national bourgeoisie" had "capitulated to the comprador bourgeoisie" and massacred the workers of Shanghai. Now Stalin switched horses by offering the title of "national bourgeoisie" to another GMD leader, Wang Jung-wei (head of the Wuhan government) and declaring that he would

carry on the anti-comprador campaign. In only another two months, this new leader of the "national bourgeoisie" also capitulated to the "comprador bourgeoisie" and began to massacre workers and peasant masses in the Wuhan area (cf p.644, *Leon Trotsky on China*).

Closely linked with the above was the dispute around the question of soviets. If, judging from arguments alone, Stalin and his company too were of the opinion that the national bourgeoisie was weak-willed in its fight against imperialism, that it might come to compromise with imperialism, and that therefore the CCP should take measures to prevent the possible betrayal of the revolution by the bourgeoisie, so the vital difference between Trotsky and Stalin lay rather in the following question: with what measure could the CCP and the workers and peasants of China effectively prevent and counter-attack the possible betrayal of the national bourgeoisie?

According to Trotsky, the only reliable measure was to advance the slogan of soviets, to carry on propaganda for them and to organise them when millions of peasants and workers in Hunan and Hupeh provinces were aroused in response to the advance of the nationalist armies³.

Stalinists bitterly opposed this slogan throughout the revolution. The reasons they put forward for their opposition were as follows: first, to call for the formation of soviets would damage the united front with the bourgeoisie; second, it would give imperialists a new excuse to fight against the Chinese revolution by saying that the Chinese revolution was only an "artificially transplanted Moscow sovietisation"; third, soviets could only be organised as an organ for insurrection, and it could only be organised as an organ for the socialist proletarian revolution; and, four, in fact the Left GMD had already been a sort of soviet.

According to Trotsky, Stalin's "entire logic represents a flagrant distortion of the meaning of our entire revolutionary experience, illuminated theoretically by Lenin" (p.150). And the further development of the Chinese revolution mercilessly refuted these reasons and proved the correctness of Trotsky's proposals. Without soviets, the Chinese workers and peasant masses found themselves completely impotent and at the mercy of the butchers in the face of the repeated betrayals of the bourgeoisie.

The CCP leadership in no way participated in the discussion. In spite of the fact that the Hong Kong-Canton Strike Committee (1925-6) was the "Chinese version of the workers' deputies"; that the peasant associations organised in Hunan province during the period of the Northern Expedition played to some extent the part of peasant soviets (cf Harold Isaacs, *Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution*, Ch 7, pp.112-3, 2nd revised edition), and that the Shanghai workers after their armed insurrection of 22 February 1927 organised their own "soviets" (such as the "District Soviet of Yang-shu-pu", see Appendix 1 to *Controversial Problems of the Chinese Revolution*, by Qu Qiu Bai, p.196), the leadership of the CCP did not pay any attention specifically to this question.

However, Qu Qiu Bai, a so-called left-wing leader of the CCP at the time, wrote in the pamphlet cited that he "proposed to call on workers of different factories and trade unions to elect representatives and to agitate among the small merchants to do the same so that 'a provincial soviet of deputies of the townspeople' could be created" (ibid p.191). But it was a passing thought; he did not raise the suggestion again, probably because he had been told of the position adopted by the dominant faction of the CPSU on this question and submitted to it.

Further charges against Trotsky launched by the Stalinists were that he overlooked the great role the petty bourgeoisie and the peasantry in particular could play in the revolution. As a matter of fact, Trotsky was more discriminating than the charges alleged. For him the questions were: first, what section of the petty bourgeoisie should the proletariat ally with, and, second, how could they unite with these allies? To the first question Trotsky replied as follows:

"...When we, the Opposition, spoke of the necessity for the revolutionary alliance of the proletariat and the petty bourgeoisie we had in mind the oppressed masses, the tens and hundreds of millions of poor of town and countryside. The Comintern leadership understood and understands the petty bourgeoisie, those petty bourgeois summits, overwhelmingly intellectuals, who, under the form of democratic parties and organisations, exploit the rural and urban poor, selling them out at the decisive moment to the big bourgeoisie." (See *The Political Situation in China and the Tasks of the Bolshevik-Leninists Opposition*, p.404).

To the second question, Trotsky's answer was: the petty bourgeoisie must be won over to the alliance through the struggle of the proletariat.

According to Stalin, and part of the left oppositionists represented by M Alsky, China at the time was divided into two camps: in one were the imperialists and militarists and certain layers of the Chinese bourgeoisie, and on the other were the workers, artisans, petty bourgeoisie, students, intelligentsia and certain groups from the middle bourgeoisie with a nationalist orientation. They represented a reactionary alliance on the one hand, and a revolutionary front on the other. This division was definite and clear-cut. The former was manipulated by the imperialists, while the latter was "by right" under the hegemony of the proletariat. Most policies adopted by the Stalinists at that period were based on this theory of two camps.

Trotsky considered such a view not only mechanistic, but false and dangerous. "In fact," said Trotsky, "there are three camps in China — the reactionary, the liberal bourgeoisie and the proletariat — fighting for hegemony over the lower strata of the petty bourgeoisie and the peasantry." (See 'Letter to Alsky', p.128, *Leon Trotsky on China*).

Both the historical experiences and socio-economic analysis teach that neither the urban petty bourgeoisie nor the peasantry will participate in the revolutionary camp and follow the leadership of the working class "by nature", i.e. simply

because of their class position. Just the opposite has been proved true: the petty bourgeoisie, and the upper layers of them in particular, were apt to be deceived and dominated by the national bourgeoisie, even by the reactionaries as well, and to be directed to fight against the working class.

To prevent this, therefore, Trotsky based almost all his policies in the Chinese revolution on the theory of three camps. The question which concerns him above all was: how could the party of the working class win the tens and hundreds of millions of poor in the town and countryside to the camp of the proletariat in order to fight against the two other camps: that of the reactionaries and of the liberal bourgeoisie.

On the question of the character of the Chinese society and the character of the Chinese revolution, Stalin levelled two charges against his opponent: one, failure to understand that "survivals of feudalism are the predominating factor in the oppression in China at the moment" ('The Revolution in China and the Tasks of the Comintern') and, two, "attempts

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mechanically to implant certain general formulas, regardless of the concrete conditions of the movement in different countries" ('Notes on Contemporary Themes').

Examination of what Trotsky had written over the period, from April 1924 till March-April 1927, however, shows that both charges are unfounded.

Unlike Radek, who contended that in China the strength of the survivals of feudalism were quite insignificant (he put forward his opinion in his book on the Chinese revolution, which was originally his lectures given in the Sun Yat-sen University, Moscow, when he was its rector), Trotsky recognised not only the existence of the "survivals of feudalism" in China, but also their "undeniable strength". But he strongly opposed Stalin-Bukharin's argument that the "survivals of feudalism dominated in Chinese economic life", and he opposed more strongly the idea that this dominance not only determined the bourgeois character of the revolution, but also determined the revolutionary character of the bourgeoisie.

Because, he thought, the feudal and capitalist relations in China were interlac-

ed in a complex and tortuous way, "There is no caste of feudal landlords in China in opposition to the bourgeoisie... the agrarian revolution is therefore just as much anti-bourgeois as it is anti-feudal in character." (*Summary and Perspectives of the Chinese Revolution*).

As for the allegation of mechanical implantation of certain formulas in China, the whole course of Trotsky's thinking on the character of the Chinese Revolution supplies a most convincing refutation. He did not deduce his views from a priori definition nor from historical analogies, but from the living structure of Chinese society and from the dynamics of its inner forces. Only by closely following the developments of the revolution, and through a series of successive approximations, did Trotsky reach his final "formula" about the character of the Chinese revolution and its revolutionary power.

It is both historically and theoretically interesting to trace, even briefly, the evolution of Trotsky's thinking on the question.

On April 21 1924, he spoke for the first time about the character and the perspectives of the Chinese revolution in a speech he delivered at the Communist University for Toilers of the East in Moscow. In it he said: "There is no doubt that if the Chinese Guomindang party manages to unify China under a national-democratic regime then the capitalist development of China will go ahead with seven-mile strides. And yet all this will prepare the mobilisation of the countless proletarian masses who will at once burst out of prehistoric, semi-barbaric state and cast themselves into industry's melting pot, the factory."

In 1925 and 1926 Trotsky did not, so far as we can see from the materials available, discuss the question of the character of the Chinese revolution in particular. He concentrated his proposals and criticisms on the question of the independence of the CCP. He was especially angered by the fact that while forbidding the CCP to withdraw from the GMD, which he considered a fundamental condition for the victory of the revolution, the Comintern comforted itself as well as the Chinese working masses, with a promise of "non-capitalist perspective of China". This perspective, he thought, could only be decided by a number of international factors.

In March 1927, we see once again Trotsky dealing with the question in his letter to Alsky (29 March): "Only an ignoramus of the socialist-reactionary variety could think that present day China, with its current technological and economic foundations, can through its own efforts jump over the capitalist phase" (emphases original).

Two days later, i.e. on 31 March 1927, in a letter to the Politbureau of the CPSU Central Committee, he again raised this question in connection with the slogan of soviets: "A system of soviets in China would not be, at least not in the coming period, an instrument of proletarian dictatorship, but one of revolutionary national liberation and democratic unification of the country... In China, what is occurring is a national-democratic revolution, not a socialist revolution" (p.135).

Then, on 3 April 1927, eight days

before Chiang Kai-shek's coup in Shanghai, in his article 'Class Relations in the Chinese Revolution', he further elaborated his ideas on the question concerned:

"Above all it must be made clear to the vanguard of the Chinese proletariat that China has no prerequisites whatsoever economically for an **independent** transition to socialism; that the revolution now unfolding under the leadership of the GMD is a bourgeois-national revolution, that it can have as its consequence, even in the event of complete victory, only the further development of productive forces on the basis of capitalism.

"But it is necessary to develop no less forcefully before the Chinese proletariat the converse side of the question as well: the belated bourgeois-national revolution is unfolding in China in conditions of the imperialist decay of capitalism. As the Russian experience has already shown — in contrast, say, to the English — politics does not at all develop in parity with economics. China's further development must be taken in an international perspective. **Despite the backwardness of the Chinese economy, and in part precisely because of this backwardness, the Chinese revolution is wholly capable of bringing to political power an alliance of workers and peasants, under the leadership of the proletariat. This regime will be China's political link with the world revolution**" (p.142).

After the defeat of the revolution in China, in 1927, disagreements between Trotskyists and Stalinists revolved around three problems: one, what assessment to make of the new situation and what slogan to adopt for it; two, what would be the relationship between the peasant war and the next upsurge of revolution; three, what attitude to take towards China's war of resistance against Japanese imperialist invasion.

When did the second Chinese revolution end? In retrospect, it seems to be very easy to answer: it ended in July 1927, when the Wuhan government openly turned against the Communists and the workers' organisations throughout the country were smashed.

At that time, however, especially to those who were directly involved, it was rather a complicated and difficult question. Even Trotsky did not reach this decision immediately. In 'New Opportunities for the Chinese Revolution, New Tasks and New Mistakes' which he wrote in September 1927, in connection with Ho Lung and Yeh Ting's "Southern Expedition" and the peasants' uprisings in Hunan province, Trotsky posed the question as follows: "Is it the epilogue common enough after great historic defeats ... or is it the spontaneous beginning of a great new chapter in the Chinese revolution?" (p.258). To this he answered: "Neither of these possibilities is excluded" (p.259).

As a revolutionary, Trotsky at first took a cautious and hopeful view of the new situation created after the debacle of Wuhan. But soon after, the defeat of the "Southern Expedition" and the tragedy of the Canton insurrection (cf p.634 in *Leon Trotsky on China*) showed that profound changes had occurred in the class

relationships of China, and he declared in June 1928 that the Chinese revolution had been definitely defeated and "we are entering in China into a period of reflux" (p.313).

Four months later, in October 1928, he expressed himself in still more definite language: "It must be distinctly understood there is not, at the present time, a revolutionary situation in China. It is rather a counter-revolutionary situation that has been substituted there, transforming itself into an inter-revolutionary period of indefinite duration. Turn with contempt from those who would tell you that this is pessimism and lack of faith. To shut one's eyes to facts is the most infamous form of lack of faith" (p.357).

It was exactly this most infamous attitude that Stalin and Bukharin struck towards this question. It was neither cautious, nor responsible. What concerned them first of all was to conceal the disasters caused by their treacherous policies. For that purpose, they not only refused to admit the defeat of the revolution, but declared that it had "entered into a higher phase". And in order to "confirm" their declaration, they ordered the CCP, which had already been brought to the brink of complete disintegration, to launch armed struggle throughout the country.

As a result, one defeat followed another, each time more serious, culminating in the Canton insurrection which was crushed in bloodshed. Stalin now was compelled to call the Canton insurrection as a "rearguard battle" yet at the same time, he and Bukharin declared it to be the "standard of the new soviet phase of the revolution" (p.351).

To the question whether the revolution had been defeated or not, no clear-cut answer was ever given. As late as the summer of 1928, at the Sixth Congress of the CCP, the assessment of the situation of China made by Stalin and Bukharin was still extremely ambiguous and treacherous. While declaring the "passing of the revolutionary rising tide", they promised that "a new, extensive revolutionary tide is inevitable" (Section 11, Politburo Resolution of the 6th National Congress of the CCP).

Different assessments of the situation

"China has no prerequisites whatsoever economically for an independent transition to socialism. But politics does not at all develop in parity with economics. Despite the backwardness, the Chinese revolution is wholly capable of bringing to political power an alliance of workers and peasants"

were followed by different slogans and policies.

Having realised that the revolutionary situation had been substituted by a counter-revolutionary one, Trotsky made a timely estimate of the possible developments in China's politics and economy: "There are sufficient grounds for assuming that the smashing of the Chinese revolution, directly due to the false leadership, will permit the Chinese and foreign bourgeoisie to overcome to a lesser or greater degree the frightful economic crisis now raging in the country" ('Summary and Perspectives').

Later on, in 'The Chinese Question after the Sixth Congress' (4 October 1928), he elaborated his thoughts in the period of "very lame stabilisation", with the reawakening of its class consciousness, the Chinese bourgeoisie would try to reap the fruits of its triumph more fully by "compelling the military cliques of the GMD to submit to the centralised apparatus of the bourgeois state" in order to "obtain an all the more favourable compromise" with the imperialists; "the aspiration of the most 'progressive' elements of the bourgeoisie and of the democratic petty bourgeoisie are now being directed" to a constitutional development, and finally even the agrarian problem will once more shift to the foreground and be posed on the parliamentary field.

For such a perspective, Trotsky formulated the central slogan of Constituent Assembly with full powers, elected by universal, equal, direct and secret suffrage. And he insisted only through an all-out struggle for the realisation of the constituent assembly and its programme (eight-hour day, confiscation of the land and the complete independence of China), could the CCP re-assemble and strengthen its own forces, re-emerge from underground, make a bloc with the masses, win their confidence, and thus prepare for the coming of the period of the creation of soviets and of direct struggle for power. To put forward the slogan of soviets in such a situation and to embark on armed struggle under that slogan, in Trotsky's opinion, was "doctrinaire, lifeless, or what is just as bad, it will be the slogan of adventurists" (p.379).

Precisely such an adventurist course did Stalin and co. take. Basing themselves on the estimate of "higher phase" and a "trough between two waves" of revolution, they bitterly opposed the slogan of a national assembly and ordered the CCP to carry out armed struggle under the slogan of soviets — which they had been condemning during the previous two years, a time when the revolution was rising. They accused Trotsky of "liquidationism" because of his sober estimate of the situation and the democratic slogan he raised. The results of Stalin's policy are well-known: the remaining organisation and influence of the CCP in the cities were finally eradicated by the year 1934⁶. A counter-revolutionary situation was thus greatly strengthened.

When, in its turn, the left-wing GMD (said by Stalin to be the petty-bourgeoisie) betrayed the revolution in the wake of the right-wing GMD (national bourgeoisie), and when the urban working class suf-

ferred crushing defeats during these betrayals, the Stalinists, true to their theory of the "bloc of four revolutionary classes", claimed that all this simply meant the withdrawal of three classes from the bloc of four, there remained one class — the peasantry; since from then on the peasants did not have to worry about a "united front" and got a free hand to carry on the agrarian revolution, so the revolution not only had entered a higher phase, but it also became more profound.

Substituting Marxist analysis of class relations with an exercise in elementary arithmetic, incredible as it may seem, was precisely the "theoretical" basis of the policy pursued by the leaders of the Comintern and the CCP of that time. They called for armed struggle throughout the country, by relying entirely on the forces of the peasantry. Although they never put this theory into any official resolution, they, especially the CCP leaders, repeatedly called the tune as follows: "We lost tens of thousands of workers, never mind, as a compensation we got millions, even tens of millions, of peasants." (This was the favourite saying of Xiang Chung-fa, general secretary of the CCP, elected at the 6th Party Congress, 18 June-11 July 1928, held in Moscow.

When he read that one of the Chinese delegates declared triumphantly at the Sixth Congress of the Comintern that after the defeat of the Canton insurrection, "the membership of the party did not decrease but grow" as the CCP gained tens of thousands of new members among the peasants, Trotsky wrote: "It seems incredible that such monstrous information could have been presented to a world congress without immediately encountering an indignant refutation."

Then he made the following comments: "...After the decisive defeats suffered by the revolution in the cities, the party, for a certain time, can still draw tens of thousands of new members from the awakening peasantry. This fact is important as a precursory sign of the great possibility in the future. But in the period under consideration it is only one form of the dissolution and the liquidation of the CCP for, by losing its proletarian nucleus, it ceases to be in conformity with its historical destination" (p.347).

Who, Stalin or Trotsky, read the situation better and correctly, time had already shown.

One of the immediate results of the defeat of the Chinese revolution was to heighten Japanese ambition in relation to China. With the aim of reducing China into the status of a colony, Japan had since 1930 brought increasing pressure, diplomatic and military, to bear on the GMD government. Japan invaded Manchuria on 18 September 1931, securing its conquests almost immediately. In February 1932 Tokyo established the puppet state of Manchukuo in the occupied territory and launched a brief punitive expedition against Shanghai. The occupation of Manchuria was followed by six years of uneasy truce, until the Japanese invasion of Central China in the summer of 1937, which opened the Sino-Japanese war.

The GMD, because of its uncompromising hostility towards Chinese workers and peasants, stuck to its non-

"After the defeats in the cities, the party can still draw tens of thousands of members from the peasantry. But it is only one form of liquidation of the CP for, by losing its proletarian nucleus, it ceases to be in conformity with its historical destination"

resistance policy and kept making one concession after another, which angered the broadest masses of China. Unleashed as usual by students, a series of demonstrations and actions of protest (such as the former North-Eastern Army capture of Chiang Kai-shek in Xian in December 1936) had taken place both against the Japanese invaders and the GMD government.

They were supported by workers, urban petty-bourgeois masses, and even by those army groups not directly connected with Chiang Kai-shek. Under this popular pressure, and with the support of the US, Britain and the USSR, the Chiang Kai-shek regime finally began a war of resistance against the Japanese invasion in July 1937. The attitude the Chinese communists should take towards the war became a fresh matter of dispute between Stalin and the exiled Trotsky, and their followers in China and throughout the world.

In line with the switch of international Stalinism from the policy of ultra-left "third period" to an ultra-right "popular front policy", the CCP had, as early as August 1935, appealed to the GMD government for a cessation of the civil war and the formation of a united anti-Japanese front. This finally materialised in the autumn of 1937 after a series of negotiations, in exchange for which the CCP accepted the following terms imposed by the GMD: one, to strive for the realisation of Sun Yat-senism; two, to abandon its policy of overthrowing the GMD and its policy of confiscation of land from landlords; three, to abolish the existing soviet government in the areas under its control; and four, to integrate the Red Army into the GMD under the command of the GMD government.

This Trotsky denounced as "a crime all the more horrible because it is being committed for the second time" (p.573), the first capitulation having taken place in the 1925-7 revolution. He, of course, wholeheartedly supported China's struggle against Japan: it was a semi-colonial country fighting for its independence against imperialist invasion.

"The duty of all the workers' organisations of China," he declared, "was to participate actively in the front line of the

present war against Japan." While in so doing, they should not "abandon for a single moment their own programme and independent activity" (p.567).

Because the war was directed by the arch-reactionary Chiang Kai-shek, there was no assurance of victory and there was always the possibility of a rotten compromise with the invaders. So both in the interest of the war and of the revolution, Trotsky believed, "the vanguard of the proletariat remains during the time of war in irreconcilable opposition to the bourgeoisie. The task of the vanguard consists in that, basing itself on the experience of the war, it is to weld the workers around the revolutionary vanguard, to rally the peasants around the workers and by that to prepare for the genuine worker-peasant government, i.e. the dictatorship of the proletariat, leading behind it millions of peasants" (p.565).

The strategic course he proposed toward the Sino-Japanese war was the same as he advanced during the Chinese revolution of 1925-7. Trotsky himself makes this clear in the following words: "during the civil war against the internal agents of imperialism, as in the national war against the foreign imperialism, the working class, while remaining in the front line of military struggle, prepare the political overthrow of the bourgeoisie" (p.570, emphasis in original).

Here a question arises: if the "second GMD-CCP alliance" was a criminal repetition of the "first alliance" of 1925-7, how do we explain that it did not bring disasters to the CCP for the second time, but on the contrary, it seemed to have helped China win the war, and then helped the CCP win the revolution?

We shall discuss this in detail later. First, let us look at the differences between Stalin and Trotsky on the peasant war in China.

The exodus of tens of thousands of revolutionaries from the major cities and the industrial areas to the countryside after the defeat of the revolution was by no means an implementation of a new strategy adopted by the Comintern or the CCP. It was simply a result of the objective circumstances: either to seek security or to continue their revolutionary activities, they had to move out of the metropolises where the repression was unbearable.

Nobody at that time advocated a new line replacing the working class of the cities by the peasantry in the countryside as the main forces of revolution. On the contrary, such a tendency was firmly opposed. For example, Bukharin, in his report to the 6th National Congress of the CCP (July 1928) condemned "another proposal intending to seek another special kind of revolutionary class as the basis of the party, viz, to leave the proletariat and go to the peasantry" (Section 6, 'The Chinese Revolution and the Tasks of the Chinese Communists'). In the same report, Bukharin even devoted a special section to "emphasise work in major cities". In it he said: "The entire peasant uprising without the aid of the cities, or, more accurately, without urban leadership, inevitably will result in defeat. Uprisings involving no cities cannot achieve victory..." (Section 9).

The 6th Congress of the CCP accepted Bukharin's line. In the Political Resolution, the Congress on the one hand declared: "the bases in the Soviet regime preserved until the present time (in the southern provinces) and their few revolutionary armies of workers and peasants will become an ever more important element in the new rising tide." On the other hand, it immediately warned "The Sixth Congress holds that the signs mentioned above **should not be overestimated**, because...at present the urban working class has not yet overcome its setbacks." (Political Resolution, Section II, point 3, emphasis added).

In his famous article 'A Single Spark Can Start a Prairie Fire' (January 1928), Mao Tse-tung vigorously advocated a peasant guerilla war. At the same time he conceded that "Proletarian leadership is the key to victory in the revolution. Building a proletarian foundation for the Party and setting up Party branches in industrial enterprises in key districts are important organisational tasks for the Party...Therefore it would be wrong to abandon the struggle in the cities..." (*Selected Works of Mao*, Vol I, pp.122-3).

Thus we see that during the period from 1928 to 1930, on the fundamental question of which class should be the leading force of the coming Chinese revolution, neither Stalin-Bukharin nor Mao Tse-tung had any difference with the traditional Marxist position. Therefore there was no difference (at least on the surface) between Stalinists and Trotskyists. The real difference between them was about tactics: how and under what slogan should the CCP direct the peasant struggle which was developing in Southern China?

Proceeding from his assessment of the situation of China as "inter-revolutionary and counter-revolutionary", Trotsky put forward the slogan for the convocation of a national assembly in order to unify politically the scattered peasant uprisings, to co-ordinate the armed struggle of the peasants with that of the working class and to link these outbursts of agrarian revolution to the possible revival in the struggle of the urban population for democracy and national independence. Only in this way, Trotsky thought, could the peasant uprisings become an important factor in precipitating the new revolution and bringing it to victory.

Since Stalin and co., as we saw above, had no consistent assessment of the situation in China for a long period after the defeat of the revolution, their tactical line for the peasant struggles was also inconsistent and ambivalent.

They solemnly kept declaring up till 1934 that the priority of the party work was among the industrial working class. Yet at the same time, the CCP members were being dragged into the peasant armed struggles. Like gamblers, they put their stakes on the armed struggle of the peasants, in which they had no great confidence, hoping that good luck might bring about a "revolutionary tide", even lead on to victory of the revolution. Therefore they opposed participating, let alone starting any democratic campaign, and desperately opposed and condemned the slogan of a national assembly as "opportunism".

Which of the two tactical lines concerning the peasant struggle of that period had been proved correct at all by the history? Let us listen to the testimony of Mao Tse-tung. In his report to the CC of the CCP, 'The Struggle in the Chingang Mountains', (November 1928) Mao wrote:

"In the past year we have fought in many places and are keenly aware that the revolutionary tide is on the ebb in the country as a whole. While Red political power has been established in a few small areas, in the country as a whole the people lack the ordinary democratic rights, the workers, the peasants, and even the bourgeois democrats do not have freedom of speech or assembly, and the worst crime is to join the Communist Party.

"Wherever the Red Army goes, the masses are cold and aloof, and only after our propaganda do they slowly move to action...We have an acute sense of isolation which we keep hoping will end. Only by launching a political and economic struggle for democracy, which will also involve the urban petty bourgeoisie, can we

"The disagreements between the Stalinists and Trotskyists soon moved to more fundamental questions. Could the peasantry replace the working class to become the main force of the revolution? Was the leadership of the communists, separated from the urban working class, equal to the leadership of the working class?"

turn the revolution into a seething tide that will surge through the country" (*Selected Works*, Vol III, pp.97-8).

There could not be a better testimony than this!

From the initial difference on tactics, the disagreements between the Stalinists and Trotskyists on the peasant war, along with its further development, soon moved off to more fundamental questions. Could the peasantry replace the working class to become the main force of the revolution? Was the leadership which the communists, separated from the urban working class, gave the peasant war equal to the leadership of the working class? What were the perspectives for these armed peasant forces led by those communists? What attitude should the Chinese revolutionaries take towards the peasant "Red Army" and countryside "Soviets"? And so forth. Trotsky was the first to raise these questions and he gave unequivocal answers to them.

Unfortunately, his opponents never openly and honestly entered the discussion. Stalin and his followers never made any serious attempts to give a theoretical analysis of the problems or give formal directives on the CCP-led peasant struggles in China. In fact, since 1930, the CCP had been to some extent left to its own fate and it groped for a way to survive.

All that Stalin had to say on the Chinese

Red Army and the Soviet movement, as far as we know, were five sentences in a speech he delivered at the 16th Congress of the CPSU in June 1930:

"It would be ridiculous to think this misconduct of imperialists will pass for them unpunished. The Chinese workers and peasants have already replied to this by the creation of soviets and a Red Army. It is said that a soviet government has already been created there. I think if it is true then there is nothing surprising in it. There is no doubt that only soviets can save China from complete dismemberment and impoverishment." (*Pravda*, 29 June 1930).

This was, as Trotsky said, simply "administrative argumentation in all its power and splendour!" It had nothing to do with either theory or responsibility, but was equivocal, ambiguous and treacherous, with the sole aim of blaming the Chinese communists in case of failure and winning for Stalin a reputation of wisdom in the event of success.

D. Manuisky, Stalin's spokesman at the Comintern at the time, fared no better in his attempt to justify theoretically the peasant armed struggle in China. He wrote in *Pravda* of 7 November 1930: "The Chinese revolution has at its disposal a Red Army, is in possession of a considerable territory, at this very moment it is creating on this territory a soviet system of workers' and peasants' power in whose government the communists are in majority. And this condition permits the proletariat to realise not only an ideological but also state hegemony over the peasantry."

Instead of supplying any theoretical basis for Stalin's five sentences, here Manuisky only revealed the ideological background of Stalin's "administrative argumentation", i.e. the bureaucratic ideology which had already formed in the CPSU: "cadres decide everything". For them, "the communists are in majority" was a self-sufficient guarantee for the realisation of "not only an ideological but also state hegemony over the peasantry".

Having discovered that guarantee, Stalin and Manuisky rested from further thinking. They abstained from pondering over those questions, which any serious Marxist would have to answer in such a situation: How could the Chinese revolution have at its disposal a Red Army not long after suffering a series of crushing defeats? In what kind of areas and in what manner was the soviet system created? What was the relation between the communists at the head of the government and the proletariat? If the communists were separated from the urban proletariat, how could they realise the working class hegemony over the peasantry?

Without considering and resolving these questions, one can never formulate a political line on the Red Army and soviet movement in China, and that was the case with Stalin and Manuisky. One cannot, therefore, say whether or not the further developments of the Chinese Red Army and soviet movement had confirmed the Stalinist line, since there was never such a line.

Things were entirely different with Trotsky. When the Red Army and soviet movement in China began to attract world

attention, he formulated a clear-cut strategical line and proposed tactical measures. In the 'Manifesto on China of the International Left Opposition' (September 1930), he declared: "The peasantry, even the most revolutionary, cannot create an independent government." **"Only the predominance of the proletariat in the decisive industrial and political centre of the country creates the necessary basis for the organisation of a Red Army and for the extension of a soviet system into the countryside."**

He further stressed that "the heart of the Chinese revolution consists in political co-ordination and the organisational combination of the proletariat and peasant uprisings. Those who talk about the victory of the soviet revolution in China, although confined to separate provinces in the South, and confronted with passivity in the industrial North, ignore the dual problems of the Chinese revolution: the problem of an alliance between the workers and the peasants and the problem of the leading role of the workers in this alliance" (p.480, emphasis in the original).

Proceeding from principles to practical measures, Trotsky advised the Chinese communists not "to scatter their forces among the isolated flames of the peasant revolt..." but to "concentrate their forces in the factories and the shops and in the workers' districts in order to explain to the workers the meaning of what is happening in the provinces, to lift the spirits of the tired and discouraged, to organise groups of workers for a struggle to defend their economic interests, and to raise the slogan of the democratic-agrarian revolution" (p.481).

In reply to Stalin-Manuilsky's "administrative argumentation", Trotsky wrote: "In what way can the proletariat realise 'state hegemony' over the peasantry, when the state power is not in its hands? It is absolutely impossible to understand this. The leading role of the isolated communists and the isolated communist groups in the peasant war does not decide the question of power. Classes decide and not parties" (p.486).

The same line of arguments were repeated and elaborated two years later (September 1932) in a letter to his Chinese comrades: 'Peasant War in China and the Proletariat'.

Trotsky's position was fully in line with the teachings of revolutionary Marxism on the question of peasant war. And it was formulated on the basis of the fresh experiences of the Russian revolution and profited from the lesson drawn from the long history of peasant rebellions in China.

However, future developments showed that the road through which the third Chinese revolution achieved its victory was not in conformity but at variance with that outlined by Trotsky. Here events "revised" and supplemented prognoses.

Being assassinated by Stalin's agent in 1940, Trotsky did not live to see the outcome of developments in China. He did not draw some new conclusions from the discrepancy between the Marxist analysis of the peasant war and the actual development of events. So it is up to a new generation of Trotskyists to resolve the

problems arising from the CCP's victory.

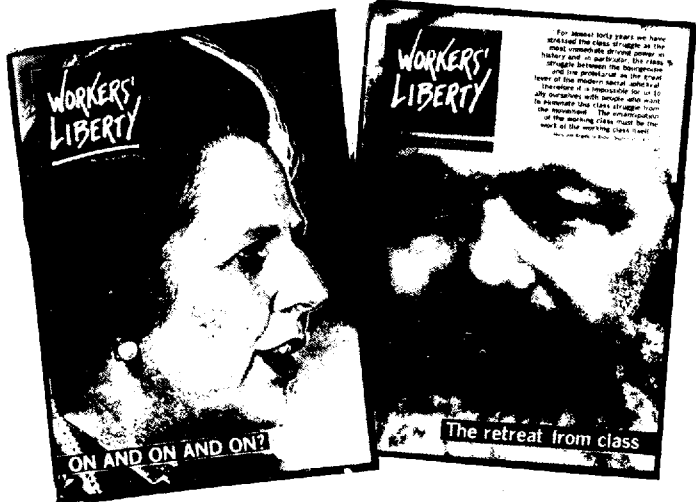
This article was originally written as the introduction to the German edition of 'Leon Trotsky on China'.

Footnotes

1. The resolution was sent to Moscow but there was no reaction to it from the Comintern until the following year when an editorial in the Communist International (no.11, 16 March 1927) entitled 'The 5th Congress of the CCP and the Goumindang' criticised it severely. The editorial writer demanded the forthcoming Congress of the CCP revise all the decisions taken at the July (1926) Plenum, but he mistakenly called it June Plenum (in fact there was no plenum in June 1926, and the previous plenum, ie. the first Plenum of the Fourth CC, had taken place in October 1925) and distorted the contents of the resolution. According to the resolution, "it is entirely wrong to advocate as some comrades so, that the CCP should sever all organisational relations with the GMD, to liquidate right now this party of the bloc of all classes..." (Reprinted in Warren Kuo's *Chung-kung Shih-jun*, Vol I, p.190). This position was presented in the editorial as "substitute an alliance as separate bodies for the policy of alliance by affiliation...which logically presupposes the exit of the CP from the GMD."

Trotsky's article 'Class Relations in the Chinese Revolution' was a direct criticism of the editorial. So he too spoke of it as the June Plenum and basing himself on the false report of the editorial he said: "It is necessary to approve as unconditionally correct the resolution of the

- June Plenum of the CC of the CCP, which demands that the party should withdraw from the GMD." As a matter of fact, Trotsky had already seen the resolution of the July Plenum six months earlier and had criticised it in his article 'The CCP and the GMD', saying: "We have taken the above-mentioned arguments from the 14 July 1926 resolution of the CCP Central Committee Plenum. This resolution, along with other documents of the Plenum, testifies to the extremely contradictory policies of the CCP and to the dangers flowing from that" (p.115).
3. The earliest published call for soviets that has been traced is his letter to Alsky, 29 March 1927. But in 'Summary and Perspectives of the Chinese Revolution' Trotsky writes: "...from 1926 on the Opposition advanced the slogan of soviets in China" (p.321).
4. Marxist historians in China as well as in the Soviet Union usually called the revolution in 1911 the First Revolution, the 1925-27 revolution the Second, and the 1949 revolution (which brought the CCP to power) the Third Revolution.
5. Until we read 'New Opportunities for the Chinese Revolution, New Tasks, and New Mistakes', which was published in English for the first time in 1976, we had believed that Trotsky declared the Chinese revolution had been definitely defeated immediately after the betrayal of the Wang Lingwei government in July 1927.
6. According to Liu Shaoqi's report to the 8th Congress of the CCP (September 1956). Since 1933, the underground organisations in the cities had been 100% eradicated.



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