

How Stalin aborted the Chinese revolution

By Max Shachtman

THERE IS hardly an event of greater world historical significance since the proletarian revolution in Russia than the awakening of the cruelly exploited and oppressed Orient, which found its most dramatic and most tragic expression in the great Chinese revolutionary movement of 1925-27. For the first time in history, the capitalist countries of Europe, long ago matured for the socialist overthrow, gave way in revolutionary precedence to an Eastern land which bid fair to condense the experiences of capitalist evolution, under the titanic blows of the social revolution, into a brief span of time and, unlike the Occidental countries, enter boldly upon the path of socialist development. A more audacious enterprise history could not imagine. Even the Russian working class was compelled to pass through a long period of capitalist development before it was peremptorily confronted with the opportunity and the need of breaking down the last barrier to the emancipation and free development of humanity. The Chinese proletariat, reaching a virile manhood at the crossroads of a revolutionary epoch, armed also with the strength of uncounted millions of insurgent peasants, was given the rare opportunity to choose between capitalist enslavement under its 'own' bourgeoisie or socialist growth in alliance with the Soviet Union and the revolutionary working class of the West.

There is no point here in arguing the academic question as to whether China has matured economically for the establishment or construction of a socialist society. It is not a question to be settled statistically or statically in China - any more than it could have been established for Russia in 1917. This problem is solved primarily on an international scale, in the conflict between the socialist and the capitalist sectors of world economy. What has, however, been demonstrated since the day of the successful counter-revolution in China, if theoretical consideration and forecast were still inadequate, was that the basic problems of China, its democratic tasks of national unification and independence, self-determination for its various peoples and the agrarian revolution included, could be solved in no other way than by the victory of the workers acting independently as a class. In other words, all the problems and antagonisms arising out of the struggle against imperialist subjection, against the remnants of feudal relationships, which could have been but were not solved by the revolution of 1925-27 or by the regime which succeeded it, will find a solution only with the success of the dictatorship of the proletariat in China. It is in the opportunity offered for the attainment of this goal that lies the great importance of the Chinese revolution of 1925-27.

But it is precisely in examining this opportunity that we encounter a monstrous historical anomaly. The revolution ended not with a victory, but with a horribly sanguinary defeat for the proletariat and the peasantry. How was this possible? In the European bourgeois revolutions of 1848, the young proletariat and the peasantry were the fighting troops for the equally youthful bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie triumphed over feudalism, and also over the proletariat. The latter still lived in the period of the rise of capitalism; it had not yet learned how to act independently as a class; it did not have at its head a conscious revolutionary leadership. Even the defeat of the Paris Commune of 1871 is not difficult to understand, nor could anybody have expected that this first faint dawn of the proletarian revolution could, under the circumstances of time and place, see the full daylight of life. One can even go farther ahead in history, to the very end of the world war. The German proletariat overthrew the Kaiser in 1918, but it did not come to power because its social democratic leadership, corrupted by the bourgeoisie, ran to the head of the marching column of mutinous workers for the purpose of turning them off to the road of bourgeois democracy.

But in China we had a partly armed proletariat. Even the peasantry was armed to a certain extent. A Communist party was in the field and had every opportunity to develop. The prestige of the Soviet Union was incalculable - every Chinese worker knew that Bolshevism had rid Russia of the imperialists and of the bankers and exploiters, every Chinese peasant knew that the Soviets had given the

THIS ARTICLE forms the original introduction to the collection of Trotsky's writings on China, *Problems of the Chinese Revolution*, published in 1931.

The author, Max Shachtman (1903-72), was, along with James P. Cannon and Martin Abern, one of the founders of American Trotskyism, and was expelled with them from the Communist Party in 1928 for supporting the Russian Opposition. For the next 12 years he was one of the ablest propagandists of Trotsky's ideas, contributing such works as *Ten Years: History and Principles of the Left Opposition* and *Behind the Moscow Trial*.

In 1940, together with James Burnham, he led a split in the Socialist Workers Party centred on their refusal to defend the Soviet Union (documented in Trotsky's *In Defence of Marxism* and Cannon's *The Struggle for a Proletarian Party*). Shachtman held that the Soviet Union was 'bureaucratic collectivist', and no longer a workers' state of any kind. His Workers Party took with it 40 per cent of the SWP's membership and a majority of the International Executive Committee elected by the founding congress of the Fourth International in 1938.

Although Burnham moved rapidly to the right, Shachtman's evolution was altogether slower and more irregular. Indeed, as the crisis of the FI deepened, Shachtman was sometimes able to criticise it from the left (for example, Yugoslavia).

Renamed the Independent Socialist League, Shachtman's organisation possessed the only viable socialist youth movement in the United States in the 1950s, which included among its members Tim Wohlforth and James Robertson - subsequently to become prominent opponents of the SWP's turn to Castroism in the early 1960s.

The ISL finally dissolved into the rump of the Socialist Party in 1958, and Shachtman himself became a Cold War social democrat, finally supporting US imperialism in Vietnam. This was a far cry from the positions he held when he wrote this article, in which he took a clear stand against Stalinism's aborting of the Chinese revolution.

Russian peasant the land. The official political counsellor to the nationalist government was the Russian Communist Borodin, just as one of its principal military directors was the Russian Communist Galen. On every occasion, the workers and the peasants showed their desire to emulate the Russians - the former by their struggles against their own bourgeoisie, the latter by their constant attempts to carry out the first real steps of the agrarian revolution. In the Communist Party itself, there was a strong current that favoured breaking away from the domination of the bourgeoisie and its Kuomintang and taking the path of independent class action. Yet, with all these and other favourable conditions, the proletariat not only did not come within reach of taking power, but was made the last object crushed under the heel of the bourgeois counter-revolution which did take and hold the power.



Max Shachtman

Where does the most active cause for this truly monstrous catastrophe lie? It was not so much objective difficulties that stood in the way. It was not the classic interference of the socialist agents of capital in the labour movement. *The Chinese proletariat was prohibited by the policies and instructions of the leadership of the Communist International, the organising centre of the world revolution, from fulfilling the role imposed upon it by history!* There is the source that must be sought to explain the bitter tragedy of the Chinese revolution.

No greater indictment can be presented against the faction of Stalin and Bukharin than this: invested with all the formal authority of the Soviet Union, of the Communist International, holding to so great an extent the destiny of China - one might say, of the whole East - in their hands, entrusted with the awful responsibility of guiding an unprecedentedly huge revolutionary movement, all they did was to translate the theories and practices of Menshevism into the language of Chinese politics, palm them off as Bolshevism, and, in the name of Lenin, pursue a course against which Lenin had fought throughout his whole political life.

All through the revolutionary period, the official leadership of the Communist International staked its cards upon the national

bourgeoisie instead of upon the worker and the peasant, upon Chiang Kai-shek, and then upon Wang Ching-wei, but not upon the Shanghai proletariat. Worse yet, the latter was told in no uncertain terms that the national bourgeoisie was the leader of the revolution, figuring as the main partner in the ill-conceived 'bloc of the four classes'. The Chinese Communist Party was driven into the bourgeois Kuomintang with the Stalinist whip, and there it was compelled to swear allegiance to the petty-bourgeois philosophy of Sun Yat-senism. The policy of class struggle was liquidated in the interests of the 'united national front'. Strikes were prohibited or else settled by 'arbitration commissions' in the best class collaborationist style, for how could the worker have a conflict of interests with the Chinese employer who was his leader in the 'united national front' of the Kuomintang? So as not to irritate the bourgeoisie, Stalin sent telegrams to the Chinese Communist Party, instructing it to restrain the peasants from taking the land. On pain of denunciation as 'Trotskyists', the equivalent among the Stalinist churchmen to excommunication, the Chinese Communists were prohibited from forming Soviets, first under the Chiang Kai-shek regime and later under the Wuhan government because, you see, the latter was already the revolutionary centre. Even though the calibre of the man was known - he had already attempted a reactionary coup d'état early in 1926 - a veritable cult was built up for Chiang Kai-shek by the international Communist press. What more striking condemnation of the official course is needed than the fact - characteristic of the whole policy - that on the eve of Chiang Kai-shek's march into Shanghai to establish the counter-revolutionary regime and to massacre the militant workers, the French Communist Party and its central organ *L'Humanité* sent him a solemn message of greetings, hailing the establishment of the Shanghai... Commune. Such 'mistakes' are not accidental. They flowed from the whole past course. By the policy of Stalin and Bukharin, not only the Chinese Communists, but the international revolutionary movement was obliged to make the mistake of confusing a Gallifet with a Communard, the counter-revolution with the Commune.

For how many years, and how heavily, has the Chinese proletariat and the Chinese peasant paid for this mistake in identity!

It would, however, be wrong to believe that this mistake was made by the whole Communist movement. No. The responsibility lies entirely upon the factions of Stalin and Bukharin, and lies doubly heavy because the Bolshevik wing of the party was wiser than they and did not trample upon the teachings of Marx and Lenin, or turn its back upon the revolutionary experiences and traditions of the past. It analysed correctly that which was at the moment, it used Marxism not to spit at but as an instrument for probing into and preparing for the future, it warned against the consequences of the prevailing policy, and *at every stage of the struggle* it advanced the essentially correct course. In every important particular, it was as correct in its prospect as it has been justified a thousand times over in retrospect.

There is no possible justification, however, for the line of the officialdom. What the lessons of the past and the events of the moment might have failed to teach them, the

Bolshevik-Leninists of Russia pointed out to them day in and day out. They were rewarded for this work by having abuse heaped upon them, by having their views deliberately distorted and misrepresented, by having their speeches hushed up and their writings suppressed, and, when the facts of life had accumulated into mountainous evidence of their correctness, they were finally expelled from the party, imprisoned, exiled or banished from the borders of the Soviet Union. The latter fate was reserved for the greatest living Bolshevik because he, more than anyone else, refused to regard the Gallifets of the Chinese revolution as its leaders, as its Communards.

But the bureaucratic, small-minded method of solving political and theoretical disputes solves nothing but a temporary consolidation of the power of the usurpers. Marx and his followers in the labour movement spent years, decades, in studying every phase of the ill-starred Paris Commune. In the discussion of the Commune and the defeated Russian revolution of 1905, Bolshevism became the dominant current in the movement and was finally able to lead the proletariat to power. In the same sense, it can be said today that without a thorough, all-sided study and assimilation of the lessons of the Chinese revolution, the Bolshevik regiments of tomorrow will not be assembled and trained to measure up to their tasks. For the lessons of the Chinese revolution have a living, timely application to the problems of the revolutionary movement in every country in the world. They relate to the fundamental principle questions of Marxism.

But such a study is today forbidden in the official Communist movement. This makes it all the more imperative that it be undertaken, for a real beginning has hardly been made. It is with this in mind that the following contributions by comrade Trotsky have been assembled and presented to American readers. With the exception of a few pages, none of them has even been published in the English language. As has unfortunately been the case with most of the serious Marxian writings of recent times, the works presented here have for the most part had to be sent out of the Soviet Union secretly. Their distribution has been made illegal by the Stalinist regime, and even when they were first presented to the Russian party and to the Communist International, those who listened to them or read them were confined to a select few hardened bureaucrats upon whom logic, arguments and facts made no impression. At the very height of the revolutionary events in China, the masses of the Communist workers were prevented from hearing the standpoint of the Left Opposition.

So overcome with the fear of the Opposition's arguments were the bureaucrats that they not only prevented the publication of the former's documents, but even their own writings and speeches, which events proceeded so rapidly to deride, had to be kept concealed. Thus, Stalin's speech in defence of Chiang Kai-shek, made a few days before the coup d'état in Shanghai, has never been made public. The whole Eighth Plenary Session of the Executive Committee of the Communist International [held in Moscow on May 18-30, 1927], at which the discussion of the Chinese question occupied the main point on the agenda, met under the conditions of a complete censorship. For the first time in the

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history of the Communist International, the proceedings of so signal a Plenum were not made public, in full or in part, in the party press of any country. The Communist world knew about its sessions only from the official resolution finally adopted and from a scant article in *Pravda*, reprinted in the *International Press Correspondence*. The censorship was not, it seems, completely airtight. Some of the Opposition's documents and a speech or two, made their way to Germany soon after the Plenum, and they were issued in pamphlet form, first by the German Left Oppositionists and later by the French. Only for the purpose of counteracting the effect of these documents did the official publishing house of the Comintern finally print, *one year after the Plenum*, a slim brochure containing the speeches delivered by Bukharin, Stalin, Manuilsky, Smeral, Pepper, Ferdi, Petrov, and a number of other apparatus men, plus one of Trotsky's speeches and one of Vujovic's. Aside from this, and an odd pamphlet here and there by T'an P'ing-shan – the official spokesman for Stalin and Bukharin in China who later turned renegade from Communism – by Heller, and a few others, the literary contributions of the Communist International on the problems of the Chinese revolution, in modern non-Russian languages, are confined to journalistic dispatches from China which distinguished themselves in every case by the fact that a week later the events robbed them of any pretension to truth or analytical importance. In English, the official literature is more limited and more worthless: a pamphlet by Earl Browder, another by R. Doonping – kindness and mercy dictate that nothing more be said about them.

These facts, as well as the intrinsic value of the material presented in this book, make a study of it one of the main duties of the revolutionary worker today. That it deals so largely 'with the past' does not rob it of one iota of its value. The present cannot be understood unless the past in which it is rooted is understood. The criminal opportunism of yesterday is being paid for by the light-hearted adventurism of the Comintern in China today. The idea of the Soviets as the instruments of the proletarian insurrection, and later the dictatorship, is being abused by Stalinism today, in the period of counter-revolution, as it was in 1927, in the period of revolutionary ascent. Yesterday, the bourgeois regime of Wuhan was passed off as a substitute for arming the workers and peasants independently and forming their Soviets. Today, the struggles of isolated, desperate peasant bands, aroused by the belated echo in the village of the revolutionary clashes of four years ago, and doomed to degeneration without the leadership of a strong, well-knit, thoroughly restored movement of proletarian revolutionists in the cities – are this time passed off by the Stalinists as the Soviet regime. And above all, the 'super-historical' formula of the 'democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry' continues to be set up against the Marxian conception of the permanent revolution so as to guarantee in advance that the coming Chinese revolution will be strangled just as fatally as the last one.

There remain three other points which require comment before these remarks are brought to an end.

Among the conceptions, or rather the misconceptions, concerning the standpoint of the Opposition in the Chinese question, as contrasted to that defended by the official spokesmen, is that the divergences were confined to an issue which is now 'outlived': the establishment of Soviets in the 1927 period. It would be more accurate to say that the differences of the kernel of the Opposition with the Stalinist standpoint were and remain concerned with all the fundamental principle questions of the Chinese revolution in *all* its phases and at *every* stage. Even in the ranks of the Opposition, particularly among the ultra-leftists, the idea took shape that the Opposition's struggle was confined to views which excluded any 'democratic' development for China, or the imperative need for advancing in China the most resolute and extreme slogans of democracy. Especially at the present stage of the counter-revolution, the need for putting forward the slogans of democracy in China becomes unpostponable. The Communists will lead the masses of workers and peasants on to the socialist path by demonstrations in life that only the dictatorship of the proletariat can solve for the people all the democratic tasks which stand on the order of the day for China. In this respect, there is no conflict between the emphasis placed by the Opposition in 1925-27 and the emphasis it places on the slogans necessary for today. The conflict

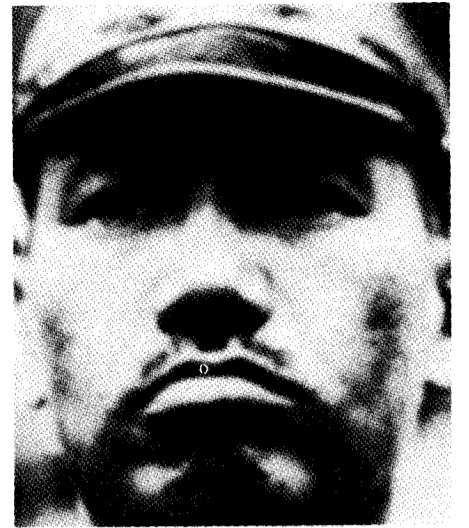
really arises in the ranks of Stalinism which, while putting forward the perspective of the 'democratic dictatorship', categorically rejects the advancement of the most necessary democratic slogans!

Further, in connection with the question of the 'democratic dictatorship', an apparent conflict may be perceived in the documents which make up this book. In the later articles, comrade Trotsky counterposes the permanent revolution to the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry, whereas the early articles do not make such a contrast; indeed, the 1927 *Platform of the Opposition* speaks for the revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry. The conflict is more apparent than real and is derived from two sources. The first is that in the bloc established in 1926 between the 'Trotsky' and the 'Zinoviev' Oppositions (the Moscow Opposition of 1923 and the Leningrad Opposition of 1925), formal concessions of this kind were made by the former to the Left Centrists of Leningrad in the interests of maintaining the bloc against the Menshevik policy of Stalin and Bukharin. The second is that in 1925-27, the slogan of the 'democratic dictatorship', borrowed literally and purely, formally from Lenin's pre-1917 writings, had not yet so clearly been filled with the reactionary content which the epigones poured into it. The Opposition, as proceeds plainly even from the early articles of comrade Trotsky, construed the slogan in the same sense that

al perspective, the frank – and not slavish – examination of the value of the slogan in the light of revolutionary experiences, and the restoration to its rightful place of the Marxian conception of the permanent revolution, expressed by Lenin for the East in particular, in those sections of the theses of the Second Congress of the Communist International which speak of the non-capitalist path of development of the backward colonial and semi-colonial countries.

A third point which may interest readers, or arouse a certain amount of confusion, is another apparent contradiction in the standpoint of the Opposition. It is only in the later documents that comrade Trotsky speaks about the Opposition having stood against the integration of the proletarian party, the Communist Party of China, into the party of the bourgeoisie, the Kuomintang. Any misunderstanding that may arise will be eliminated by reproducing part of a letter written by comrade Trotsky to the present writer on December 10, 1930, which I take the liberty of quoting.

'You are quite right when you point out that the Russian Opposition, as late as the first half of 1927, did not demand openly the withdrawal from the Kuomintang. I believe, however, that I have already commented on this fact publicly somewhere. I personally was from the very beginning, that is, from 1923, resolutely opposed to the Communist Party joining the Kuomintang.



Kuomintang leader Chiang Kai-shek in 1935

lutely fatal. Thus, the manifesto [of the International Left Opposition on the Chinese question, issued late in 1930] in no way contradicts the facts when it contends that the Russian Opposition, the real one, was against the Communist Party joining the Kuomintang. Out of the thousands of imprisoned, exiled, etc, hardly a single one was with Radek in this question. This fact too I have referred to in many letters, namely, that the great majority of the capitulators were not sure and firm in the



A student agitator addresses a Shanghai mass meeting in the spring of 1927

Lenin construed it in and after 1917, that is, that the 'democratic dictatorship' was not realised in the 'democratic period' (the first six months) of the October revolution, but realised under the dictatorship of the proletariat. Long before the revolution, Lenin had written that the slogan had a past and a future. For China, the epigones, looking backward only to the past – and even there with a distorted vision – filled the slogan with a reactionary content, which they still seek to apply not only to 'backward China', but to about four-fifths of the whole world . . . including modern Spain. One of the greatest contributions to the movement made by the Opposition, and in the first place by comrade Trotsky, is the setting of the old Leninist slogan in its proper historic-

as well as against the acceptance of the Kuomintang into the "Kuomintern". Radek was always with Zinoviev against me. The younger members of the Opposition of 1923 were with me almost to a man. Rakovsky was in Paris and not sufficiently informed. Up to 1926, I always voted independently in the Political Bureau on this question, against all the others. In 1925, simultaneously with the theses on the Eastern Chinese Railway which I have quoted in the Opposition press, I once more presented the formal proposal that the Communist Party leave the Kuomintang instantly. This was unanimously rejected and contributed a great deal to the baiting later on. In 1926 and 1927, I had uninterrupted conflicts with the Zinovievists on this question. Two or three times, the matter stood at the breaking point. Our centre consisted of approximately equal numbers from both of the allied tendencies, for it was after all only a bloc. At the voting, the position of the 1923 Opposition was betrayed by Radek, out of principle, and by Piatakov, out of unprincipledness. Our faction (1923) was furious about it, and demanded that Radek and Piatakov be recalled from the centre. But since it was a question of splitting with the Zinovievists, it was the general decision that I must submit publicly in this question and acquaint the Opposition in writing with my standpoint. And that is how it happened that the demand was put up by us so late, in spite of the fact that the Political Bureau and the Plenum of the Central Committee always contrasted my view with the official view of the Opposition. Now I can say with certainty that I made a mistake by submitting formally in this question. In any case, this mistake became quite clear only by the further evolution of the Zinovievists. At that time, the split with them appeared to the overwhelming majority of our faction as abso-

Chinese and the Anglo-Russian question. That is very characteristic! . . .'

The documents which follow are arranged more or less in chronological order. As a whole, they present a fairly thorough picture of the course of the Chinese revolution and the struggle for Bolshevism which the Opposition carried on in all the periods of its development, up to the present day. How brilliantly they demonstrate the indispensability of Marxism – which serves the revolutionist to foresee the coming day and to prepare for it – can be left to the reader to judge. As appendices, we have included articles and speeches by other comrades. The suppressed theses of Zinoviev present invaluable facts and documents, even though they present the relations between the Communist Party and the Kuomintang in a confused manner. The Shanghai letter by three Russian comrades, all of them opponents of 'Trotskyism', shows that the leadership of the Comintern was well aware of the real state of affairs in China. The letter is presented here for the first time. It suffered the same fate of suppression as so much other important material. Indeed, one of its authors, the youth comrade Nassonov, together with the party comrade Mandalyan, was recalled in disgrace from China by Stalin. As punishment, Nassonov was 'exiled' to the United States as representative of the Young Communist International, and I still recall how he would tell me that in spite of everything, Stalin had been 'compelled in the end to carry out' his viewpoint . . .

In conclusion, the writer wishes to express his gratitude, and the appreciation of the publishers, to his comrades Sam Gordon and Morris Lewit, who gave such indispensable assistance in the final checking of the translations.

New York, August 7, 1931



Chen Duxiu, founder of the CCP, scapegoated by the Comintern for the defeated revolution