

# Stalin's Policy in China, 1925-27: New Light from Russian Archives\*

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*In mid-1927, the communist movement in China suffered its first serious defeat. One of the main causes was the Comintern Chinese policy, then directed by Joseph Stalin. New documents from the Russian Archives reveal, however, that Stalin tried his best to lead the Chinese Communists to victory. His policy failed because it was determined by his adherence to the false concept of a so-called "multi-class party." In accordance with this doctrine, the Communists had to make the Kuomintang (KMT, Nationalist Party) as "leftist" as possible, namely, by changing it into a "workers' and peasants' party." Nonetheless, from its position inside the KMT, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was unable to struggle successfully for hegemony. In fact, the Communists condemned themselves to constant retreat in the face of their ally irrespective of what particular directives they received from Moscow, as it was impossible to implement orders to communize the KMT without risking the breakup of the united front. However, leaving the KMT would mean burying any hope of turn-*

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*ing it into a "workers' and peasants' party." In essence, Stalin himself was trapped in a cul-de-sac.*

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Joseph Stalin's policy in China during the Chinese revolution of 1925-27 has been the object of numerous scholarly inquiries. This is hardly surprising. Historians have often been inspired to analyze the reasons for the profound defeat inflicted on the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) during this period by the Kuomintang (KMT, Nationalist Party), its former ally in the united front. To what degree was Stalin, and the Comintern which was under his influence, responsible for this defeat? What considerations guided the leader of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolshevik) (AUCP[B]) in formulating his China policy? How did he assess the strategic and tactical tasks of the communists in China?

Amidst discordant opinions, two approaches to these questions stand out. Most Western historians and commentators are inclined to believe that Stalin's views concerning China in the mid-1920s were characterized by a kind of totalist KMT-centrism, i.e., that Stalin counted on a victory of the anti-imperialist revolution in China at any price, even at the expense of the CCP. The supporters of this view believe that Stalin's line, at least from 1925 on, was grounded in his notion that it was possible to build socialism in one country, namely, the Soviet Union. In other words, his was a policy of national communism. From this perspective, in the period under review, the Politburo of the AUCP(B), aiming above all to secure the state interests of the USSR in the Far East, bent its efforts toward activating the Chinese national revolutionary movement led by the KMT in order to deal the heaviest blow possible to British imperialism. At the time, the Soviet leadership perceived Great Britain as its main enemy.

This view has been presented in greatest detail by Harold Isaacs, who states:

By the time the revolution began to stir in China and the Soviet bureaucracy turned its attention to the East, the dynamic Bolshevism of Lenin and Trotsky had given way to the empiricism of Stalin clothed in the scholastic formulas

of Bukharin. Not the interests of the proletariat in China, but the desire to find a strong national bourgeois ally became the fundamental motivation of their policies.<sup>1</sup>

This position was fully shared by Isaac Deutscher whose book, *The Prophet Unarmed*, emphasizes that:

Neither Bukharin nor Stalin who . . . effectively directed Soviet policy, believed that Chinese communism had any chance of seizing power in the near future; and both were anxious to maintain the Soviet alliance with the Kuomintang. The growth of communist influence threatened to disrupt that alliance and so they were determined to keep the Chinese [Communist] party in its place.<sup>2</sup>

The works of Isaacs and Deutscher are responsible for the considerable popularity of this view among specialists. At the same time, it should be noted that neither Isaacs nor Deutscher originated this interpretation. In the 1920s, these views were already expressed by several observers. In a declaration of June 27, 1927, the activists of one of the opposition factions of the AUCP(B), the Democratic Centralist group led by Vladimir M. Smirnov, wrote that:

The Stalinist Central Committee is obviously trying to convert the Chinese revolution into a Chinese war against imperialism rather than a detachment of the world revolution. . . . The [Central Committee] views the Chinese revolution simply as a means of inflicting a maximum blow against the enemies of the USSR. This is not a policy of the Comintern, but of the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs.<sup>3</sup>

In April 1927, the Menshevik *Sotsialisticheskii vestnik* (The Socialist Herald) made the following observation:

In principle the Bolsheviks also stood for the preservation of the "united front" in the Chinese revolution up until the completion of the task of national liberation. . . . But . . . in fact, the "infantile leftism" of utopian adventurism was joined with the desire to "use" the Chinese revolution in the Soviet government's struggle against Britain.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Harold R. Isaacs, *The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1938), 52.

<sup>2</sup>Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Unarmed: Trotsky, 1921-1929* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 319.

<sup>3</sup>"Under Lenin's Banner," in *Kommunisticheskaya Oppozitsiya v SSSR, 1923-1927: Iz arkhiva L'va Trotskogo* (The Communist Opposition in the USSR, 1923-1927: From Leon Trotsky's archives), ed. Yuri Fel'shtinsky (Benson: Chalidze Publishers, 1988), 3:191.

<sup>4</sup>*Sotsialisticheskii vestnik* (The Socialist Herald), 1927, no. 8:4.

In October 1927, Louis Fisher, the Moscow correspondent of *The Nation*, an American periodical, wrote that "the Stalin majority" of the AUCP(B) "neglected the proper development of the Chinese revolution in order more quickly to spike the British."<sup>5</sup>

Without rejecting this point of view entirely, another group of historians more plausibly notes the absence of any sort of well thought-out tactics in Stalin's China policy. In their view, the Chinese question served the interests of the intra-party conflict within the AUCP(B) above all, as the Stalinists shamelessly used it to expose Leon Trotsky's alleged "errors." This approach is represented most prominently by Conrad Brandt, who emphasizes that:

China policy involved the struggle which gradually split the Bolsheviks into opposing factions. . . . It thus became a domestic issue ever more unrelated to actual changes on the Chinese scene, which sank into the far background. China as such all but disappeared behind China, object of policy, object to be handled this way or that, according to Moscow's decision. . . . Hence, when they [the Oppositionists] attacked his alliance with Chiang [Kai-shek], they only made Stalin defend him all the more firmly and blindly.<sup>6</sup>

For all of their seeming logic, however, both perspectives are open to question. The first approach was disproved as early as 1939 by none other than Trotsky, Stalin's main opponent in the China discussions of the 1920s. He did so in a conversation with the American socialist C.L.R. James (pseudonym Johnson) who also shared this view. "Formalism" was Trotsky's reaction to James' contention that the Soviet bureaucracy was quite prepared to support a bourgeois-democratic revolution in China, but because it was a bureaucracy, it could not support a proletarian revolution. He went on to expand on these thoughts:

What happened was that the bureaucracy acquired certain bureaucratic habits of thinking. It proposed to restrain the peasants today so as not to frighten the generals. It thought it would push the bourgeoisie to the left. It saw the Kuomintang as a body of office-holders and thought it could put the Communists into the offices and so change the direction of events. . . . Stalin and

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<sup>5</sup>Louis Fisher, "China—Seen from Moscow," *The Nation* 125, no. 3256 (1927): 613.

<sup>6</sup>Conrad Brandt, *Stalin's Failure in China, 1924-1927* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), 79, 80.

Co. genuinely believed that the Chinese revolution was a bourgeois-democratic revolution and sought to establish the dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry.<sup>7</sup>

The documentary materials similarly fail to support the second perspective. Can one really explain Stalin's conviction in his private correspondence with Viacheslav Molotov, his closest confederate, on September 26, 1926 that ". . . Hankow will soon become the Chinese Moscow" as a lack of principle?<sup>8</sup>

What, then, was Stalin's actual position with respect to the Chinese revolution of 1925-27? The documents preserved in the Russian Archives enable us to take a fresh look at this question.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Formation of Stalin's Policy**

The archival materials make it evident that Stalin began to elaborate his own view of the Chinese revolution no earlier than the spring of 1925, soon after his break with Grigorii E. Zinoviev, then the chairman of the Comintern. Grigorii Voitinsky, who headed the Far Eastern Section of the Eastern Department of the Comintern Executive Committee (ECCI), was the person who exercised significant influence upon Stalin at this time. One can see this, for example, in a letter that Voitinsky wrote to the Soviet ambassador to China Lev Karakhan on April 22, 1925. This letter said, in part:

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<sup>7</sup>Leon Trotsky, "On the History of the Left Opposition," in *Writings of Leon Trotsky (1938-39)*, ed. George Breitman and Evelyn Reed (New York: Merit Publishers, 1969), 61-62.

<sup>8</sup>Lars T. Lih et al., eds., *Stalin's Letters to Molotov: 1925-1936* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), 130. Hankow (Hankou) was then the capital of left KMT China.

<sup>9</sup>Most of these documents have not yet been published. Only a portion of them, including suitable materials of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the AUCP(B), have recently appeared. See Liudmila Kosheleva et al., eds., *Pis'ma I. V. Stalina V. I. Molotovu, 1925-1936 gg.: Sbornik dokumentov* (J. V. Stalin's letters to V. I. Molotov, 1925-1936, A collection of documents) (Moscow: Rossiya Molodaya, 1995); Mikhail Titarenko et al., eds., *VKP(B), Komintern i natsional'no-revoliutsionnoye dvizheniye v Kitaie: Dokumenty* (AUCP[B], the Comintern, and the national-revolutionary movement in China: Documents), vol. 2: 1926-1927 (Moscow: AO "Buklet," 1996).

The other day, in the course of a lengthy conversation with Stalin, it became evident that he believes the Communists have dissolved themselves into the Kuomintang, that they lack an independent organization, and that the Kuomintang is "mistreating" them. While expressing his regrets about the dependent position of the Communists, Comrade Stalin believed that in China such a situation was apparently historically inevitable for the time being. He was extremely surprised when we explained to him that the Communist party has its own organization, one that is more cohesive than the Kuomintang, that the Communists enjoy the right of criticism within the Kuomintang, and that the work of the Kuomintang itself in large measure is being carried out by our comrades. In defending his views concerning the position of Communists inside the Kuomintang, Stalin cited newspaper reports and, in general, our information coming from China. One may truly suppose that for people who have not been to China and are unfamiliar with the way things are there, Borodin's communiqués would create precisely such an impression.<sup>10</sup>

At that time, the problem of a split within the KMT was exacerbated, provoked by a struggle over Sun Yat-sen's legacy between competing factions. Voitinsky considered this a propitious moment to raise with the leadership of the ECCI, the RKP(B),<sup>11</sup> and the CCP the question of increasing CP efforts to strengthen its ties with the KMT "leftists" with the objective of excluding the "rightists" from the party. (To the latter category, the Communists assigned those persons who, from their perspective, represented the interests of the large and medium bourgeoisie.) Thus, he aimed at the radical transformation of the class and political character of the KMT by means of an intra-party seizure of power by the "leftists" and the Communists. This was openly expressed in the Comintern and RKP(B) press in March 1925, in *Kommunisticheskii internatsional* (The Communist International) and *Bol'shevik* (The Bolshevik).<sup>12</sup>

Voitinsky's proposal corresponded with the idea of transforming the KMT into a "workers' and peasants' [or people's] party," which in and of itself was nothing new. During the Fifth Comintern Congress in June 1924,

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<sup>10</sup>Grigorii Voitinsky's Letter to Lev Karakhan" (April 22, 1925), Russian Center, Collection of non-filed documents. Borodin was the political advisor to the KMT Central Executive Committee and the Comintern's representative in China, 1923-27.

<sup>11</sup>The Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks) (RKP[B]) was renamed the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) (AUCP[B]) in December 1925.

<sup>12</sup>Grigorii Voitinsky, "Trends in the Revolutionary Movement in China and the Kuomintang," *Kommunisticheskii internatsional* (The Communist International), 1925, no. 3:153-58; Grigorii Voitinsky, "Sun Yat-sen and the Liberation Movement in China," *Bol'shevik* (The Bolshevik), 1925, no. 5-6:44-52.

Dmitrii Manuilsky and Manabendra Nath Roy, members of the ECCI, made the first public mention of the need to form "multi-class" leftist parties in a number of countries in the East.<sup>13</sup> At that time, however, nothing came out of the conversations. Stalin did not accept this idea at the time, stating that "the creation of such hybrid parties in India and China would be harmful."<sup>14</sup> He agreed to consider the possibility of forming such parties only in "several very backward countries."<sup>15</sup> As for the bloc with the KMT, he still viewed it in the spirit of the ECCI policy that had been given concrete form by Karl Radek in August 1922 in his instructions to Hendrikus Sneevliet (alias Maring), the ECCI representative in China. Within this policy framework, the CCP had to use the KMT temporarily until the former became a mass political party in its own right.<sup>16</sup>

The situation changed, however, in the spring of 1925. Stalin considered the possibility that Communists and other "leftists" in the KMT might seize power, and also hoped that the same might happen in other bourgeois parties of larger countries in the East, and thus reexamined Manuilsky's and Roy's formula. He embraced the concept of a "workers' and peasants' [people's] party" as a maneuver that might facilitate the establishment of the communist hegemony in the nationalist movement. This was the angle from which he analyzed the draft resolution of the Fifth Enlarged Plenum of the ECCI (March-April 1925) concerning work in India (the plenum did not adopt any specific resolution concerning China). In his remarks on this

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<sup>13</sup>This was not discussed beforehand in the RKP(B) Central Committee. See Russian Center 492/1/73/14,15; *Piatii Vsemirnoi Kongress Kommunisticheskogo Internatsionala, 17 iyuniya-8 iyulya 1924 goda: Stenograficheskii oichet* (The Fifth World Congress of the Communist International, June 17-July 8, 1924: Stenographic report) (Moscow/Leningrad: Gosizdat, 1925), 1:592, 593, 618. Also see materials of the Fifth Congress commission on national and colonial questions, and Stalin's letter to Manuilsky of July 31, 1924 (Russian Center 492/1/209-219; 558/1/2633/1-2). Two years before the Fifth Comintern Congress, in July 1922 an ECCI representative in China Hendrikus Sneevliet (alias Maring) in his secret report to the ECCI portrayed the KMT as a "bloc of various classes." However, at the time his characteristic did not lead the ECCI to the creation of a special theory of "workers' and peasants' (or people's) party." The Comintern continued to consider the KMT and other national parties in Asia as bourgeois or petite bourgeois.

<sup>14</sup>Russian Center 492/1/219/12.

<sup>15</sup>"Letter from Stalin to Manuilsky" (July 31, 1924), Russian Center 558/1/2633/1.

<sup>16</sup>For Radek's instructions, see Alexander Pantsov and Gregor Benton, "Did Trotsky Oppose Entering the Guomindang 'From the First'?" *Republican China* 19, no. 2 (1994): 61-63.

document, Stalin singled out the question of establishing communist hegemony in the future Indian "people's party."<sup>17</sup>

Stalin's instructions were immediately put into effect by the Eastern Department of the ECCI, which disseminated them throughout China without delay. "In this connection, the Communist Party of China," Voitinsky said rather transparently, "even though it is the party of the industrial proletariat, will not establish the hegemony of the proletariat directly as in purely capitalist countries nor even as it did in pre-revolutionary Russia, but rather via the national-revolutionary party."<sup>18</sup>

In May 1925, Stalin finally expressed himself openly on this issue in a speech to the Communist University of the Toilers of the East (CUTE) delivered at an anniversary gathering of students and teachers from this school on May 18, 1925. At this time, he defined the KMT as being already a real "workers' and peasants' party," and posed the question of establishing the CCP's hegemony within it as an immediate task.<sup>19</sup> In this speech as well as in his report delivered a few days earlier (on May 9) to the activists of the Moscow Organization of the RKP(B) on the work of the Fourteenth Party Conference, Stalin also formulated his thoughts concerning the level of socioeconomic development in the East. "We now have at least three categories of colonial and dependent countries," he emphasized in his May 18 speech. "First, countries like Morocco, which have no proletariat or almost no proletariat, and are industrially quite undeveloped. Second, countries like China and Egypt, which are industrially little developed, and have a relatively small proletariat. Third, countries like India, which are capitalistically more or less developed and have a more or less numerous national proletariat."<sup>20</sup> In his May 9 speech, Stalin also pointed to a "rapid rate" of development of capitalism in all of the colonial countries.<sup>21</sup>

From this he concluded that by May 1925 the revolutionary move-

<sup>17</sup>Russian Center 495/163/177/1-4.

<sup>18</sup>Grigorii Voitinsky, "A Colonial Question at the ECCI Enlarged Plenum," *Kommunisticheskii internatsional*, 1925, no.4:64.

<sup>19</sup>Russian Center 558/1/2714/17-18. This speech was published in *Pravda* on May 22, 1925.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>21</sup>J. V. Stalin, *Works* (London: Red Star Press, n.d.), 7:107.



ment in "the industrially developed and developing colonies" (i.e., India, China, Egypt) already faced the need to resolve the same tasks that the Russian revolutionary movement faced on the eve of 1905.<sup>22</sup> In other words, Stalin believed that the revolutionary process in these countries had acquired more of a democratic than an anti-imperialist character. It was then generally accepted in the Comintern that in no circumstances could "representatives of the national bourgeoisie" implement a democratic program of revolution in the East; this was something only Communists could do. When one considers this formula, it is easy to see that Stalin's reasoning provided additional support for his idea that it was necessary to establish the CCP's hegemony in the "workers' and peasants' Kuomintang" as quickly as possible.

Accepting Stalin's views as their guide, the Eastern Department of the ECCI again responded without delay. The department's report to the Sixth Enlarged Plenum of the ECCI in February-March 1926 emphasized that "in the period covered by this report, the work of the Eastern Department was based on the concepts Comrade Stalin outlined in his speech at the anniversary celebration of CUTE."<sup>23</sup>

The influence of Stalin's corresponding directives was also evident in the work of the Sixth Plenum in contrast with the Fifth Plenum, which had adopted a special "Resolution on the Chinese Question." The resolution declared:

The political actions of the proletariat<sup>24</sup> have provided a powerful impetus to the further development and strengthening of all revolutionary democratic organizations in the country, in the first instance the *people's revolutionary party, the Kuomintang* and the revolutionary government in Guangzhou. . . . The tactical problems of the Chinese national revolutionary movement closely resemble the problems faced by the Russian proletariat during the 1905 Revolution.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 108.

<sup>23</sup>Russian Center 495/164/16/91.

<sup>24</sup>The reference was to political strikes by Chinese workers in Shanghai and Hong Kong-Guangzhou, which began in May and June 1925, respectively.

<sup>25</sup>Mikhail Titarenko, ed., *Kommunisticheskii Internatsional i Kitaiskaya revoliutsiya: Dokumenty i materialy* (The Communist International and the Chinese revolution: Documents and materials) (Moscow: Nauka, 1986), 58, 61. Emphasis added.

The rapid upsurge of the anti-imperialist movement in China at this time helped to crystallize Stalin's views. The movement was characterized by the intensification of workers' struggles, an increase in the activities of the CCP and of Soviet advisors in the KMT and its army, and also the obvious and apparently long-term increase of interest on the part of the KMT leaders in the development of relations with the USSR and even with the Comintern. The latter manifested itself in a flurry of "leftist," pro-communist rhetoric at the KMT's Second Congress in January 1926. This was also evident in the speech by Hu Han-min, one of the KMT leaders, on the first day of the Sixth Plenum of the ECCI. He actually stated the following:

There is only one world revolution, and the Chinese revolution is a part of it. On basic questions the teachings of our great leader Sun Yat-sen concur with Marxism and Leninism. . . . The Kuomintang's slogan is "For the popular masses!" This means that the workers and peasants must take political power into their own hands.<sup>26</sup>

In February 1926, soon after the KMT's Second Congress, the KMT Central Executive Committee (CEC) even directed an official request to the Presidium of the Comintern, asking that the KMT be admitted into the Comintern. In a letter that was transmitted to Comintern leaders by Hu Han-min, the KMT CEC emphasized that "the Kuomintang is striving to fulfill the task that the revolutionary movement in China has faced for thirty years, namely, the transition from a national revolution to a socialist one."<sup>27</sup>

In February 1926, leaders of the AUCP(B) Central Committee and the ECCI seriously considered the aforementioned request by the KMT CEC. A majority of the Politburo even voted to admit the KMT as a sympathizer party.<sup>28</sup> However, caution then gained the upper hand. Acting on a proposal of the Presidium of the ECCI, and following consultation between Voitinsky and Stalin and Zinoviev, an evasive letter was drafted to

<sup>26</sup>*Shestoi Rasshirenniy Plenum Ispolkoma Komintern (17 fevral'ya-15 marta 1926): Stenograficheskii otchet* (The Sixth Enlarged Plenum of the Comintern Executive Committee [February 17-March 15, 1926]: Stenographic report) (Moscow/Leningrad: Gospolitizdat, 1927), 8.

<sup>27</sup>Russian Center 514/1/168/219.

<sup>28</sup>See *ibid.*, 505, 1, 65, 21; Leon Trotsky, "Stalin and the Chinese Revolution: Facts and Documents," *Biulleten Opozitsii* (Bulletin of the Opposition), 1930, no. 15-16:8.

the KMT CEC.<sup>29</sup> Events did not move, however, in the direction that Comintern leaders were urgently pushing them.

### **The First Defeat: Stalin and Chiang Kai-shek's "Coup" in Guangzhou**

Implementation of the Comintern resolutions, which were directed at communizing the KMT, turned on the almost transparent attempt of Soviet advisors and Chinese Communists to seize control of the apparatus of the KMT CEC and the Nationalist government. This naturally led to Chiang Kai-shek's anticommunist "coup" in Guangzhou on March 20, 1926. The connection between the "coup" and the "offensive line and seizure of power" that the ECCI conducted toward the KMT was acknowledged indirectly, i.e., without directly accusing the ECCI. This was done by a Politburo Commission of Inspection, which visited Guangzhou in February-March 1926 to carry out inspections and stumbled into the epicenter of events,<sup>30</sup> as well as by Moisei Rafes, the secretary of the Far Eastern Bureau of the ECCI, who was in the city in late July and August.<sup>31</sup>

There could be no mistake that the "coup" was directed against both the Chinese as well as the Soviet Communists (that is, Soviet military and political advisors), and their attempts to strengthen their influence in the KMT. The "coup" signaled the establishment of a virtually open military dictatorship of KMT "centrists" on the territory controlled by the KMT's Nationalist government. Furthermore, the "coup" significantly weakened not only the position of the Communists, but also the KMT "leftists" grouped around Wang Ching-wei, the chairman of the Nationalist government; Wang left the country, and several Communists found themselves tempo-

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<sup>29</sup>See Russian Center 514/1/171/7-9; and 168/219; 505/1/65/33.

<sup>30</sup>The chairman of the commission was the chief of the Main Political Administration of the Red Army A. S. Bubnov. His reports as well as his letter of instructions to Borodin about the March 20 events, preserved in the Russian Center, were recently published. See Titarenko, *VKP(B), Komintern i natsional'no-revoliutsionnoe dvizheniye v Kitaie* 2:139-52, 157-62, 208-27.

<sup>31</sup>See Russian Center 495/165/71/4.

rarily under arrest. The League of Chinese Military Youth that they headed was dispersed, and peasant unions in the villages which were mass organizations that had constituted one of the most important fields of KMT and CCP activity since the summer of 1924 were disarmed. The most serious development from the CCP's perspective was that soon after the "coup," in May 1926, at the Second Plenum of the KMT CEC, the Chiang Kai-shek faction put forward a series of demands aimed at significantly limiting its political and organizational autonomy inside the KMT.<sup>32</sup>

What was Stalin's immediate reaction to these events? Historians usually point out that the general secretary of the AUCP(B) Central Committee forced the Chinese Communists to make concessions to Chiang Kai-shek in order to preserve the united front.<sup>33</sup> This is true. But exactly how and when did he do this, and what motivated him to do so?

The documents make it evident that in the first days after the "coup," the Bolshevik leadership was certainly gripped by confusion. The dearth of information also made itself felt.<sup>34</sup> At first, Stalin and his supporters simply tried to play for time, counting on a rapid upsurge of the mass worker-peasant movement in Guangdong which might make it possible to neutralize the putschists. This is evident, for example, from the fact that at the very beginning of April, in a discussion of general problems of Soviet-Chinese-Japanese relations—the draft resolution had been prepared by a commission headed by Trotsky—it was Stalin who proposed including the

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<sup>32</sup>These demands were introduced at the KMT CEC plenum by Chiang Kai-shek. The text of his demands, with changes introduced by participants in the plenum, are in Russian Center, Collection of non-filed documents. For the text of the corresponding resolution adopted by the plenum, see *Zhongguo Guomindang diyi, dierci quanguo daibiaodahui huiyi shiliao* (Historical materials of the first and second Kuomintang congresses), vol. 2 (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1986), 53-54.

<sup>33</sup>See, for example, Brandt, *Stalin's Failure in China*, 71-83; Peng Shu-tse, "Introduction," in *Leon Trotsky on China*, ed. Les Evans and Russell Block (New York: Monad Press, 1976), 53-54.

<sup>34</sup>Rafes' following admission several months after the coup gives some idea of the level of information concerning the events of March 20 that was then available in Moscow: "When we arrived in China [in mid-June 1926], everything we learned from our comrades concerning the March 20 events in Guangzhou and Chiang Kai-shek's military demonstration against the left Kuomintang and the Communists was completely news to us. In Moscow we really had no idea of what had occurred in Guangzhou on March 20. We had no idea of how far these actions had gone or how profound their consequences were." Russian Center 495/165/71/2.

two following paragraphs in the text:

In the near term the Guangzhou government must concentrate all its efforts on the internal strengthening of the republic by carrying out appropriate agrarian, financial, administrative, and political reforms, by drawing the broad masses into the political life of the South China republic, and by strengthening its internal defense capacity.

In the present period, the Guangzhou government must put aside any ideas about conducting offensive military expeditions and, in general, of taking any actions that might push the imperialists onto the path of military intervention.<sup>35</sup>

Needless to say, what was meant by "offensive military expeditions" was the Northern Expedition. In speaking out against this, Stalin was obviously motivated by the entirely logical fear that under the pretext of war-time conditions, the advance of KMT armies to the North would inevitably limit the possibility of radicalizing the Guangzhou regime. The Politburo agreed with his point of view.<sup>36</sup>

Not a single Soviet leader, in the period immediately following the "coup," proposed that the Communists leave the KMT. At a session of the Politburo discussing reports from Guangzhou that some Chinese Communists were contemplating anti-Chiang Kai-shek actions, even Trotsky proposed a resolution condemning such "insurrectionary" intentions.<sup>37</sup> It was not until some time later, sometime in the second half of April 1926, that Trotsky proposed to the Politburo that the CCP withdraw from the KMT (it is impossible to give a more precise date until such time as the Presidential Archive of the Russian Federation is opened). At approximately the same time, Voitinsky temporarily hesitated in regard to this question. In a letter to Chen Duxiu of April 24, he proposed "terminating efforts to form a joint alliance with the Kuomintang."<sup>38</sup> Shortly thereafter, the April 29 meeting of the Politburo discussed a report from China saying that the forthcoming May plenum of the KMT CEC would address head-on the question of the

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<sup>35</sup>See "Extract from the Protocol of the Eighteenth Session of the Politburo of the CC AUCP(B), April 1, 1926," Russian Center, Collection of non-filed documents.

<sup>36</sup>See Titarenko, *VKP(B), Komintern i natsional'no-revoliutsionnoye dvizheniye v Kitaie 2*: 163-64, 170.

<sup>37</sup>See Russian Center 17/2/317/1/139.

<sup>38</sup>Titarenko, *VKP(B), Komintern i natsional'no-revoliutsionnoye dvizheniye v Kitaie 2*:188.

CCP's future in the KMT. At this meeting, Voitinsky proposed that "in case of dire necessity," the best-known Communists should leave the KMT of their own accord. He also expressed the view that "in the extreme case," consideration should be given to the possibility of wholly "demarcating the boundaries between the Communists and members of the Kuomintang in conducting future work on the basis of collaboration between two independent parties." Zinoviev supported him.<sup>39</sup>

Stalin, however, could not accept these proposals, which demolished his entire tactical plan. After all, from his perspective, a few weeks earlier the Communists were on the eve of seizing power in the "workers' and peasants' Kuomintang." According to Stalin's logic, one could not simply surrender the positions that had been "conquered"; this would be tantamount to unjustified capitulation to the KMT "rightists."

On April 29, 1926, a secret Politburo resolution on the problems of the united front in China was adopted. A CCP split with the KMT was considered out of the question; Stalin, however, agreed to return to the matter later if it turned out the trend inside the KMT "for organizational demarcation with the Communists was strong." For the time being, the policy of active CCP intervention in the KMT's internal affairs with the aim of ousting "rightists" from the party was confirmed. The only innovation was the decision to slow down the tempo of the Communist offensive inside the KMT in order to regroup forces. Stalin considered it necessary to make only "internal organizational concessions to the *Kuomintang* leftists in the sense of a shuffling of personnel."<sup>40</sup> The focus was thus only on "leftists." The Politburo considered Chiang Kai-shek's action as a conflict between the Communists and their objective allies (none of the Soviet leaders viewed Chiang Kai-shek at the time as a "rightist"). The resolution was adopted unanimously (Zinoviev also voted for it; Trotsky did not attend the meeting).

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<sup>39</sup>[Grigorii Zinoviev,] "Statement to Stenogram of the Joint Plenum of the CC and Central Control Commission," Trotsky Archive at Harvard, Russ 13T, 886, 2. Zinoviev mistakenly referred to this Politburo meeting as taking place in May 1927. On his authorship of the document, see Russian Center 495/166/189/2.

<sup>40</sup>Russian Center 17/162/3/55. Emphasis added.

In May 1926, the Politburo expressed opposition to the Northern Expedition as it had done before. "In view of the complicated . . . circumstances," it reluctantly approved the dispatch of only a small expeditionary corps of the National Revolutionary Army (NRA) of China "to defend Hunan province as the approach to Guangdong, with the proviso that the troops not disperse themselves beyond the borders of this province." At the same time, it ordered the ECCI and the Soviet government to "increase its assistance in all ways, in terms of finances and personnel, to the Communist party, advising it, incidentally, to step up its work inside the Kuomintang, and pursue a line of isolating the Kuomintang rightists."<sup>41</sup>

Chiang Kai-shek's rather skillful maneuvering, among other reasons, helps to explain why the Politburo considered concessions to Chiang Kai-shek necessary measures to facilitate the regrouping of forces in the "leftist" camp. A short while after the "coup," Chiang placed limits on the activity not only of Communists, but also of "rightists," some of whom were relieved of their posts. At the end of May, Guangzhou chief of police Wu Tiesheng, one of the most ardent advocates of excluding the CCP from the KMT, was even arrested. Michael Borodin, Moscow's chief informant on Chinese affairs, viewed this as a concrete manifestation of the "powerlessness" of the "rightist" faction. He interpreted the resolution adopted by the KMT CEC Second Plenum limiting the activity of the CCP as merely a tactical step intended to "remove misunderstandings" between the Communist Party and "honest Kuomintang members." He even believed that "the resolution adopted by the [KMT] CEC plenum on the Communists dealt a sharper blow to the rightists than to the Communists."<sup>42</sup>

The Politburo's tactics could not be successful, however, as applied to the concrete conditions unfolding in China. The Northern Expedition became a reality against Stalin's will. Because it had incorporated some of the militarists into its own ranks, the officer corps of the NRA became increasingly conservative; the influence of the "rightists" thus grew. Commander-in-Chief Chiang Kai-shek increasingly shifted toward their po-

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 59, 74.

<sup>42</sup>Titarenko, *VKP(B), Komintern i natsional'no-revoliutsionnoye dvizheniye v Kitaie* 2:231.

sition. In the summer of 1926, even the AUCP(B) Politburo ceased to consider him as a "leftist" and began to view him as a "centrist." Inasmuch as the balance of forces in the KMT was not in its favor, the CCP was powerless in effecting a purge of "anticommunists" from within the ranks of the KMT. It was under these circumstances that Stalin was forced to abandon his tactic of a cautious offensive and the regrouping of forces, shifting to a temporary retreat. He decided to make concessions to the "rightists," although neither he nor his supporters had abandoned their hopes for the communization of the KMT. As Anatolii Martynov, one of Stalin's collaborators, later characterized the tactics of retreat: "We retreat so that we may leap forward better."<sup>43</sup>

Judging from the archival materials, Moscow's decision that the Communists should make concessions to the "rightists" was made no earlier than the end of October 1926. On October 26, on the proposal of Stalin's collaborator, Kliment Voroshilov, USSR People's Commissar for Military and Naval Affairs, the Politburo adopted a directive to the Far Eastern Bureau of the ECCI in Shanghai forbidding the development of a campaign against the Chinese bourgeoisie and the feudal intelligentsia, i.e., those elements whom the Comintern traditionally considered as "rightists." The directive emphasized that:

As long as the danger from the imperialists and the North exists, and the prospect of conflict with them is unavoidable, the Kuomintang must protect all of its potential allies and fellow travelers. We agree that the agrarian problem must be put onto the agenda as a practical matter, and that victory is impossible without the peasants. However, the near-term development of civil war in the villages at a time when war with imperialism and its agents is at its height would weaken the fighting capacity of the Kuomintang.<sup>44</sup>

The directive was addressed to the Far Eastern Bureau in response to its telegraphic report of October 22; the latter was composed by Voitinsky,<sup>45</sup> who sought the leadership's permission for the Chinese Communists to

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<sup>43</sup>Anatolii Martynov, "The Comintern Before the Court of the Liquidationists," *Kommunisticheskii internatsional*, 1927, no. 30:10.

<sup>44</sup>Russian Center 17/162/4/10.

<sup>45</sup>From June 1926 to January 1927, Voitinsky headed the ECCI Far Eastern Bureau in Shanghai under the pseudonym Seregin.



unleash a mass movement in the rear of the NRA.<sup>46</sup>

Commenting on the Politburo's October directive several months after the defeat of the Communist movement in China, Stalin characterized it as an unfortunate misunderstanding: "It was an isolated, episodic telegram, totally uncharacteristic of the line of the Comintern, of the line of our leadership," he explained at the Joint Plenum of the Central Committee and Central Control Commission of the AUCP(B).<sup>47</sup> Voroshilov also considered it an isolated, spur-of-the-moment occurrence.<sup>48</sup> However, Stalin's and the Politburo's refusal to support Voitinsky's proposals was indeed evidence of their new political course in China. Judging by Rafes' declaration, which was made at the end of November 1926, shortly after his return to Moscow from China, this was exactly how the Far Eastern Bureau interpreted the telegram. This, moreover, was the only political directive of a general nature that this organ had received during its five months of operation in China (June-October 1926).<sup>49</sup>

The ideas formulated in the aforementioned directive were affirmed and elaborated in the speeches of Stalin's closest comrades-in-arms, Nikolai Bukharin and Fedor Raskol'nikov, who were Comintern leaders, at the Fifteenth Conference of the AUCP(B) which ran from October 26 to November 3, 1926. Their speeches offered a different characterization of the social composition of the KMT than that given at the Sixth Plenum of the ECCI. Taking a step backwards, as it were, to the assessments that had prevailed in the Comintern until mid-May 1925, Stalin's supporters characterized the KMT on this occasion as a party that united in its ranks not only workers, peasants, and the "urban democrats," but also the commercial-industrial bourgeoisie. Moreover, they no longer called for transforming the KMT into "worker-peasant" organization at a rapid tempo, but for the most part stressed the need to make every effort to preserve and strengthen

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<sup>46</sup>See Titarenko, *VKP(B), Komintern i natsional'no-revoliutsionnoye dvizheniye v Kitaie 2*: 485-86.

<sup>47</sup>Stalin, *Works* 10:18.

<sup>48</sup>See Russian Center 17/2/317/1/83-84. It is true, however, that the two comrades-in-arms did not see eye-to-eye in their appraisal of the directive in question. Stalin believed it was "unquestionably a mistake," while Voroshilov deemed it irreproachably correct.

<sup>49</sup>See Russian Center 495/165/71/27-31.

the united front in China. They therefore underscored the need for the CCP to avoid any sort of actions whatsoever that might lead to splits or even cracks within the united front.<sup>50</sup>

### **The ECCI Seventh Enlarged Plenum: New Offensive?**

The retreat did not continue for long, however. The aggravation of the situation inside the KMT, where the struggle for power among various leaders intensified in late 1926, compelled Stalin to once again make adjustments in his China policy. The Seventh Enlarged Plenum of the ECCI (November-December 1926) signaled the beginning of a new, albeit this time rather cautious Comintern shift in the direction of seizing power in the KMT.

On the eve of the plenum, disagreements arose within the leadership of the AUCP(B) concerning the immediate tasks of the revolutionary movement in China and, correspondingly, over the line of the CCP. Two extreme points of view were represented. First was Raskol'nikov's, vigorously supported by A. S. Bubnov (chief of the Main Political Administration of the Red Army), and Manuil'sky. Second was Pavel Mif's, the associate dean of Sun Yat-sen University of the Toilers of China (UTC) whose views were also shared by a number of Soviet and Comintern representatives in China.

Raskol'nikov proceeded to develop a variant of the notion that the CCP should continue to retreat before Chiang Kai-shek, the "centrists," and the "rightists," believing that the pursuit of agrarian revolution in China was "inappropriate" while the national liberation movement was developing. He also was extremely cautious with respect to the revolution's future prospects, hypothesizing that it could "take one of two paths." First, it could go the way of Turkey, i.e., degenerate into a military dictatorship of the large industrial bourgeoisie, with Chiang Kai-shek becoming a

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<sup>50</sup>See *XV Konferentsiya Vsesoiuznoi Kommunisticheskoi Partii (B), 26 oktiabrya-3 noiabrya 1926: Stenograficheskii otchet* (The Fifteenth Conference of the All-Union Communist Party [B], October 26-November 3, 1926: Stenographic report) (Moscow/Leningrad: Gosizdat, 1927), 27-28, 86-87, 99.

Kemal Pasha.<sup>51</sup> Second, it could lead to the creation of a "petite bourgeois government supported by the working class and peasantry and under the protection of the Soviet Union."<sup>52</sup>

Mif stood much more to "the left," emphasizing the need to "develop the proletarian tendencies of the Chinese revolution." He categorically rejected a "Turkish" or "Kemalist" path of development for China, affirming only one prospect. "In China [we] will have the power of the revolutionary petite bourgeoisie with the organizational role of the proletariat, [and] a completely worker-peasant government."<sup>53</sup> In his draft theses, Mif even included the demands to "organize peasant soviets without delay" and "evict all gentry,<sup>54</sup> notables, and landlords who held the instruments of power and exploited the Chinese peasantry."<sup>55</sup>

Finally, Stalin, speaking at the session of the Chinese Preparatory Commission of the ECCI, intervened in the dispute between Raskol'nikov and Mif. His speech was rather conciliatory. On the one hand, he supported Raskol'nikov, putting special emphasis on the nationalist character of the unfolding Chinese revolution, and did not say a word about the "tendency toward compromise" of the Chinese national bourgeoisie. On the contrary, once again, as he had prior to 1925, he saw this class as a real, albeit "weak" member of the united front. Moreover, he censured "some comrades" who believed that "there would have to be a repetition among the Chinese of exactly the same thing that took place here in Russia in 1905."<sup>56</sup> He also expressed disagreement with Mif on the question of establishing peasant soviets.

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<sup>51</sup>Pasha Mustapha Kemal Atatürk (1881-1938) established a bourgeois, pro-Western regime in Turkey in 1923. In the beginning of the 1920s, the Bolsheviks regarded him as an anti-imperialist ally.

<sup>52</sup>Russian Center 495/165/67/45. See also *ibid.*, 68/40-49. After the discussion of this draft in the Chinese Commission of the ECCI, Raskol'nikov, together with Bubnov, introduced some insignificant changes into the text. A new draft was prepared called "The Bubnov-Petrov Theses." At the same time, Manuilsky presented his theses which differed very little in essentials from Raskol'nikov's draft. Italics added.

<sup>53</sup>Russian Center 495/165/67/49, 50-51. Italics added.

<sup>54</sup>"Gentry" was how the *shenshi* were referred to at the time in Soviet literature on China.

<sup>55</sup>Russian Center 495/165/69/7, 8.

<sup>56</sup>Stalin, *Works* 8:373-74.

On the other hand, Stalin demonstrated that he had not abandoned his hope for the establishment of a CCP hegemony in China at what he deemed an appropriate time. His speech makes it clear that the ideal which took shape in his mind in the preceding period had merely been temporarily pushed forward into the future. He again grounded his thought in the notion that sooner or later the national bourgeoisie would pass over to the side of reaction, and that the role of the leader of the revolution would inevitably pass into the hands of the Chinese proletariat and its party. Under their leadership, a revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry would be established in China, which would resemble a democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry such as the Bolsheviks had foreseen for Russia in 1905, "with the difference, however, that it [would] be first and foremost an anti-imperialist government."<sup>57</sup> The reference to the anti-imperialist character of the future "worker-peasant" power in China lacked any substantive meaning, however. Stalin frankly emphasized that this would be a government "transitional to a non-capitalist or, more exactly, a socialist development of China."<sup>58</sup>

The general secretary also opposed excessive caution with respect to the revolution in the Chinese countryside, albeit only in general terms. He simply emphasized that one should not be afraid of the involvement of the peasantry in the revolution. "The more quickly and thoroughly the Chinese peasantry is drawn into the revolution," he pointed out, "the stronger and more powerful the anti-imperialist front in China will be."<sup>59</sup> Stalin refrained, however, from stipulating any concrete steps that might attract the peasants to the CCP and the KMT.

The Seventh Plenum naturally agreed with Stalin's point of view. A new draft composed by Manabendra Nath Roy, a member of the Chinese Preparatory Commission, formed the basis of the final text of the resolution concerning the situation in China. Roy's draft was supplemented by Ras-kol'nikov, Bubnov, and Stalin.<sup>60</sup> The document as a whole characterized

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<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 382. See also Russian Center 495/165/267/103.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid.

<sup>59</sup>Stalin, *Works* 8:385.

<sup>60</sup>See Russian Center 495/165/273/14; 495/165/273/278.

the social composition of the KMT different from that of the Sixth Plenum of the ECCI. It defined the KMT as a bloc of four social groups—the proletariat, the peasantry, the urban petite bourgeoisie, and parts of the national bourgeoisie—rather than as a "workers' and peasants' party."<sup>61</sup> The Seventh Plenum of the ECCI also defined the prospects for the KMT's development differently, observing that even when "the basic motive force becomes a more revolutionary bloc—a bloc of the proletariat, the peasantry, and the urban petite bourgeoisie," this will not mean the elimination of the entire bourgeoisie from the arena of the national liberation struggle.<sup>62</sup> In this connection, the plenum cautiously approached the formulation of demands which, from its perspective, the CCP and the KMT ought to put forward as their agrarian program in the districts under Nationalist government control. The resolution presented Raskol'nikov's proposals: namely, no agrarian revolution, but rather rent and tax reduction, confiscation of land from counterrevolutionaries, and so forth.<sup>63</sup>

At the same time, the resolution expressed the idea that as the Chinese revolutionary movement developed, the CCP would succeed in converting the KMT into a "genuine people's party," establish its own hegemony within it, and then establish a revolutionary, anti-imperialist government which would provide "democratic dictatorship of the proletariat, the peasantry, and other exploited classes." Moreover, the document indicated that in pursuing its policy in the countryside, the CCP should not be afraid of the possibility of exacerbating class conflict. On the contrary, it was obligated to accord the question of agrarian revolution "a prominent place in the program of the national liberation movement," without worrying that such a formulation would weaken the anti-imperialist united front.<sup>64</sup>

These new tactics were also reflected in a Stalinist directive on China sent to Borodin on December 17, 1926. On the one hand, it still stipulated the need to direct the urban struggle only "against the big bourgeoisie and,

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<sup>61</sup>Titarenko, *Kommunisticheskii Internatsional i Kitaisakaya revoliutsiya*, 92-93.

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid.*, 97-98.

<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*, 99, 94, 96.

most of all, against the imperialists, so that to the maximum extent possible the petite and medium bourgeoisie will remain within the framework of the united front against a common foe." On the other hand, it also emphasized that "the general policy of retreat in the cities and the curtailment of the workers' struggle to improve their position is incorrect. . . . Decrees against the freedom to strike, against workers' meetings, and so forth, are absolutely impermissible."<sup>65</sup>

This was still a far cry, however, from a real offensive. In practice, the tactics of flirting with the "rightists" was continued for a while longer. In the beginning of 1927, it even led to the establishment of official relations between the Comintern and the KMT in response to another request from the KMT CEC, and this time from Chiang Kai-shek himself. The request was delivered via Shao Li-tzu, a well-known KMT figure, who visited Moscow in September 1926. The Presidium of the ECCI, with the blessing of the Politburo, passed a resolution concerning the mutual exchange of representatives between the Comintern and the KMT, according to which the representative of the KMT CEC (Shao Li-tzu himself) was made a member of the Presidium of the ECCI with a consultative vote.<sup>66</sup>

### **Stalin's Maneuvers: From New Offensive to New Retreat**

In the meantime, events in China were unfolding rapidly. By early March 1927, NRA troops had brought significant areas of central and eastern China under their control, and Comintern agents had informed Moscow of the upsurge of a mass worker-peasant movement. On February 19, 1927, the workers of Shanghai launched a political struggle, and on February 22, their general strike grew into an armed uprising. Although it was suspended two days later, the general atmosphere in the country had apparently become sharply radicalized. Under these circumstances, Stalin

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<sup>65</sup>Russian Center 17/162/4/34.

<sup>66</sup>See *ibid.* 514/1/233/61-72; 514/1/240/1.

attempted to resume an aggressive policy within the KMT. In February, the Politburo adopted urgent measures to assist the return to China of Wang Ching-wei, the leader of the KMT "leftists," who was then living in France. With Wang Ching-wei's return (via Moscow<sup>67</sup> of course, where Comintern officials were ready to discuss Chinese affairs with him), the Soviet leadership quite logically placed its hopes on the strengthening of the KMT "leftist" faction.

On March 3, 1927, the Politburo categorically resolved to make changes in the CCP's policy and work methods. Acting on the proposal of its Chinese Commission, the Politburo ordered the CCP "come what may" to launch a worker-peasant movement, and draw workers into the Communist party, and working and peasant masses into the KMT. The Politburo asserted that it was necessary to:

Energetically create a peasant, petite bourgeois, and worker base under the left Kuomintang . . . to aim at ousting Kuomintang rightists, to discredit them politically, and systematically strip them of their leading posts, . . . pursue a policy of seizing the most important positions in the army . . . strengthen the work of Kuomintang and Communist cells in the army . . . look toward the arming of workers and peasants, and convert the local peasant committees into actual organs of power with self-defense capacity.<sup>68</sup>

The CCP was charged with the responsibility of operating under its own slogans "everywhere and always." The resolution emphasized that "a policy of voluntary semi-legality is impermissible. The Communist party must not act as a brake on the mass movement. . . . Otherwise, the revolution will be gravely threatened."<sup>69</sup>

The new course, however, did not influence the Politburo's view of the agrarian question in China.<sup>70</sup> Not without reason, Stalin and his lieutenants feared that a radical revolution in the Chinese countryside would destroy the intra-party bloc of the CCP and the KMT. Soon disturbing news began to arrive from China. On March 24, two days after the entry

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<sup>67</sup>Ibid., 64.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 71-72.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., 83.

of NRA troops into Shanghai, and the following day after their seizure of Nanjing, the imperialists openly intervened in the war in China. Nanjing, occupied by NRA troops, was subjected to shelling from British and American warships. The sharp contradictions within the revolutionary camp became ever more glaring. Chiang Kai-shek, the commander-in-chief of the NRA, obviously intended to repeat the events of March 20, 1926, but this time with a much harsher outcome.<sup>71</sup> Clashes between his soldiers and armed contingents of workers and peasants multiplied. In a number of areas, Chiang supporters smashed trade union organizations.

Under these circumstances, Stalin, who was afraid of provoking Chiang Kai-shek, retreated again. At the end of March 1927, the Politburo decided to make concessions to Chiang. Directives were sent to China ordering the CCP CEC "to make every effort to avoid clashes with the National Army in Shanghai and with its leaders."<sup>72</sup>

On April 4 and 5, Bukharin, who was then heading the ECCI, and Stalin respectively gave speeches explaining their positions at a closed meeting of Moscow party organization activists. The main report was made by Bukharin, who acknowledged "the beginning" of a sharp class struggle in China, manifested in the KMT "rightists'" offensive against the CCP, and the worker-peasant movement (he even noted instances of shooting of workers by KMT soldiers). Nevertheless, the core of his report was directed toward justifying the policy of retreat. "One need not suppose that this is a comprehensive campaign against the workers and peasants," he reassured his audience; "We will not attempt to disguise the ugliness of the rightists. They must be unmasked. But we must make use of the features of the organizational structure."<sup>73</sup> Stalin gave an even more soothing

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<sup>71</sup>Voitinsky already informed Moscow of Chiang Kai-shek's putschist intentions in late February 1927. See *ibid.* 514/1/240/12-13.

<sup>72</sup>*Ibid.* 17/162/4/90-93.

<sup>73</sup>"N. I. Bukharin's Report on the Chinese Revolution to the Moscow Party Activists" (April 4, 1927), *ibid.* 324/1/353/5, 6. Later, this report, in a significantly revised form, was published under the title, "Problems of the Chinese Revolution," in a collection of articles titled *Voprosi Kitaiskoi revoliutsii* (Questions of the Chinese revolution) (Moscow/Leningrad: Gosizdat, 1927), 57-122. Another equally edited version of the report was published in *Pravda* on April 19, 1927.



speech.<sup>74</sup> He rejected the Opposition's accusation that Comintern and AUCP(B) leaders had hushed up instances of suppression of the Chinese worker-peasant movement by Chiang Kai-shek's forces. "We do not want to conceal this," he stated, "but we do not want to exaggerate it in our press." Overall, according to Stalin, the situation inside the KMT was quite favorable to the Communists, as together with the "leftists," they constituted "the majority" in the KMT in this "sort of revolutionary parliament." The "rightists" supposedly listened to them, and Chiang Kai-shek was merely directing his army against imperialists. "The peasant needs an old worn-out jade as long as it is necessary," Stalin summed up; "So it is with us. When the Right is of no more use to us, we will drive it away. At present, we need the Right." In general, things were going well, and the ECCI was in control of the situation, Stalin concluded. The "rightists" were demoralizing the militarists' rear, and giving money to the revolution, and only in a united front with them could the Communists and the "leftists" withstand the combined forces of the imperialists.<sup>75</sup>

Several days later, Stalin's confederate Martynov systematically set forth the tactic of retreat.<sup>76</sup> The essence of Martynov's explanation was as follows. In China, he wrote, what was taking place was an anti-imperialist bourgeois revolution, the leading force of which was "a bloc of four classes" (the industrial bourgeoisie, the proletariat, the peasantry, and the urban petite bourgeoisie) whose organizational expression was the KMT. The

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<sup>74</sup>This speech was never published, and the official stenogram of it was not distributed. Attempts by Trotsky and other Oppositionists to obtain the text of the speech from the Central Committee Secretariat, from Stalin's and Bukharin's secretaries, and from the Moscow Committee were unsuccessful. For information on this point, see Russian Center 589/3/4307/1/215; 495/166/189/3. The most complete version of the speech was provided by the Serbian communist Vuyo Vuyovitch who cited his "exact notes" at the Eighth Plenum of the ECCI. He misdated Stalin's speech, however. See *ibid.* 495/166/191/31-32. Vuyovitch's speech was translated into English and published by Max Shachtman in Leon Trotsky, *Problems of the Chinese Revolution* (New York: Pioneer Publisher, 1932), 382-96. Stalin's unwillingness to make his speech broadly accessible to public opinion is understandable, as the course of events in China undermined all of his basic conclusions so quickly that it would have been impossible to correct the stenogram. With Martynov's help, Stalin tried to prepare at least some brief theses on the basis of his speech, but in the end he also withheld them from publication. See Joseph Stalin, "Theses on the Chinese Question," Russian Center 558/1/2848/1-8.

<sup>75</sup>Trotsky, *Problems of the Chinese Revolution*, 388-90.

<sup>76</sup>Anatolii Martynov, "A Problem of the Chinese Revolution," *Pravda*, April 10, 1927.

proletariat was striving to achieve hegemony in this bloc and in the revolution in general, and transform the KMT "into an instrument of the revolutionary dictatorship of three classes," i.e., a bloc comprising the same social forces minus the bourgeoisie. However, the proletariat had no need to hurry, as it was reasoned that the bourgeoisie would drop away of its own accord as a result of the strengthening of the proletariat. Forcing the pace of events would thus only strengthen the position of the big bourgeoisie inside the KMT and lead to the isolation of the working class.

### The Final Zigzags

Chiang Kai-shek's coup on April 12 changed the situation radically, as Stalin's main concern now became saving his reputation. Admitting his errors would only strengthen the Opposition, which was actively speaking out at this time against the Politburo's China policy. In this connection, Stalin's initial reaction was to torpedo any sort of open discussion about the causes of the failure. The regular plenum of the AUCP(B) Central Committee that met after the coup devoted no more than three to four hours to the Chinese problem, notwithstanding the insistent demands of Trotsky and Zinoviev. In essence, it limited itself to hearing the report of the chairman of the Council of People's Commissars, A. I. Rykov, on the latest events in China and the decisions of the Politburo relating to them.<sup>77</sup> On Molotov's proposal, no stenographic record was made of the corresponding session on the evening of April 14. The members of the Central Committee, with the exception of supporters of the Opposition, endorsed the Politburo's policy "on the international question."<sup>78</sup>

In the open press, as soon as the coup occurred, the Stalinists simply

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<sup>77</sup>See Russian Center 17/2/284/23. It has not been possible to ascertain the content of the decisions of the party's highest organ on which Rykov reported. Judging by the archival protocols, there were no Politburo meetings between April 7 and 16. Perhaps the reference is to the intention to make a loan of three million dollars to the Wuhan KMT government, Chiang Kai-shek's main opponent. The Politburo adopted a resolution in this regard on April 16. See *ibid.* 162/4/102.

<sup>78</sup>*Pravda*, April 19, 1927.

branded Chiang Kai-shek a traitor who had sold out to imperialism. Not until later was a deeper explanation offered. *Kommunisticheskii Internatsional* printed an article by the editors—probably written by Martynov—which gave voice to the notion that as early as its Seventh Plenum, the ECCI had "foreseen" the events in Shanghai. The author had in mind the thesis contained in the appropriate resolution of the Seventh Plenum concerning the inevitable withdrawal from the revolutionary camp of "the bulk of the big capitalist bourgeoisie." He expressed his natural satisfaction with the perspicacity of the Comintern, the more so as, in his words, the "treachery" of the bourgeoisie bore witness to the fact that the Chinese revolution had entered a higher stage.<sup>79</sup>

Finally, on April 21, Stalin himself spoke. On this day *Pravda* published his work "Questions of the Chinese Revolution," compiled as theses for propagandists. Stalin attempted to provide a theoretical explanation for what had happened in China. Taking account of the changed situation, he offered a number of new points: he divided the Chinese revolution into two stages, and defined the first as taking place right up to Chiang Kai-shek's April 1927 coup. Stalin characterized this stage as "the revolution of an *all-national* united front," in whose framework both the national bourgeoisie and the proletariat tried to use each other for their own purposes. According to Stalin's logic, the Shanghai events marked "the desertion of the national bourgeoisie from the revolution" and the beginning of the second stage in which "a *swing* [had] begun away from the revolution of an *all-national* united front and toward a revolution of the vast masses of the *workers* and *peasants*, toward an *agrarian* revolution." In this situation, Stalin stressed, one had to work toward concentrating all power in the country in the hands of "the revolutionary Kuomintang" in its capacity as a bloc between the "leftists" and the Communists, transforming it in fact into an organ of the revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry. As the principal "antidote" to counterrevolution, Stalin proclaimed "the arming of the workers and peasants." At the same time, he reminded his readers that the Chinese revolution, as before, was

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<sup>79</sup>See *Kommunisticheskii internatsional*, 1927, no. 16:3-10.

nationalist in character, and that it was unfolding in specific conditions that differed from those in Russia.<sup>80</sup>

This work testifies that the general secretary of the AUCP(B) Central Committee had yet again begun to reexamine the tactic of the CCP's retreat inside the KMT. The objective conditions for this, according to his logic, were created by the action of the "rightists" in "cutting their ties" with the revolution.

Several days later, Stalin elaborated on the basic propositions stated in "Questions of the Chinese Revolution" in a declaration written in the Politburo's name on May 7, 1927. This was a response to Zinoviev's theses on the Chinese question which had been addressed to the Politburo as far back as April 13 and intended for participants in the April plenum of the Central Committee.<sup>81</sup> This Stalin's document, which was stamped "Absolutely Secret," and which, along with Zinoviev's theses, was distributed only to the members of the Central Committee, took direct aim at the views of the Opposition.<sup>82</sup> It was never published, but Stalin repeated a number of its inferences in his public speeches of that period.<sup>83</sup> The declaration was particularly notable in stating that it was inappropriate to organize soviets in China (beginning in late March 1927, the Oppositionists had begun repeating that it was necessary to organize soviets). Stalin regarded the slogan of soviets as a call to an uprising against "the revolutionary KMT" and, needless to say, rejected it. All of his calculations concerning the ultimate communization of this party were constructed on an indispensable condition: the presence of the CCP inside the KMT.

Stalin's writings defined the direction of the Politburo's and Comin-

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<sup>80</sup>Stalin, *Works* 9:224-34.

<sup>81</sup>Zinoviev's theses, however, were not distributed to the participants in the plenum. For the text, see Russian Center 17/2/284 or 495/166/187. For the English translation, see Trotsky, *Problems of the Chinese Revolution*, 313-81.

<sup>82</sup>See "On Comrade Zinoviev's Theses Concerning the Chinese Question," Russian Center 17/3/634/16-32.

<sup>83</sup>See Joseph Stalin, "Concerning Questions of the Chinese Revolution: Reply to Comrade Marchulin," in Stalin, *Works* 9:236-42; Joseph Stalin, "Talk with Students of the Sun Yat-sen University" (May 13, 1927), *ibid.*, 243-73; Joseph Stalin, "The Revolution in China and the Tasks of the Comintern: Speech Delivered at the Tenth Sitting, Eighth Plenum of the E.C.C.I." (May 24, 1927), *ibid.*, 288-318.

tern's China policy until the end of June 1927. If until mid-April 1927, the Soviet leadership was preoccupied with the question of how to "clean out" the "rightists" from the KMT while maintaining a united front with the "leftists" and the "centrists," now Moscow staked its hopes on radicalizing the KMT "left" itself. However, this time the Chinese Communists had to make sure not to force their partners out of their very own KMT; instead, they had to "push" the Wang Ching-wei types persistently to organize a real social revolution by convincing them that if they "[did] not learn to be revolutionary Jacobins, they [would] perish so far as the people and the revolution are concerned."<sup>84</sup> These instructions were contained in directives from the Politburo to the CCP Central Committee and to Comintern representatives in China on May 13 and 30 and June 3, 6, 9, 18, and 20.<sup>85</sup> On June 23, the Politburo even sent a telegram to Wang Ching-wei in an attempt to convince him that "the Kuomintang must definitely support the agrarian revolution and the peasantry."<sup>86</sup> On June 27, KMT leaders were sent another telegram calling on them to organize "workers and peasants" into military units faithful to the revolution.<sup>87</sup> In this connection, the Soviets actively provided loans to the Wuhan government.

However, events outran Stalin, as the Nationalist government in Wuhan literally fell to pieces before his eyes. One after another, the generals who had recently sworn allegiance to the KMT "left" abandoned Wuhan. A most difficult economic situation was also created as a result of withdrawal by the industrialists and merchants under its control. Unable to salvage the situation, government leaders themselves began to adopt increasingly open anti-worker and anti-peasant policies. Relations between the KMT "leftists" and the Communists became increasingly strained.

At the end of June, Stalin became seriously concerned that Wuhan would "lose its nerve" and fall under Chiang Kai-shek's control. He began to consider possible concessions to Wang Ching-wei along government and Comintern lines, such as removing Borodin, or sending new subsidies "just

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<sup>84</sup>Russian Center 17/162/5/30.

<sup>85</sup>See *ibid.*, 8-9, 29-30, 33-34, 36-38, 42, 49-51.

<sup>86</sup>*Ibid.*, 46; cited in Stalin, *Works* 10:35.

<sup>87</sup>Russian Center 17/162/5/54.

in order to have a guarantee that Wuhan does not surrender to the tender mercies of Nanjing."<sup>88</sup> Parallel with this anxiety, however, grew his dissatisfaction with the obvious unwillingness of the Wuhan government to radicalize itself. In the end, Stalin decisively rejected the idea of concessions, while the Soviet government began to lean toward the idea of mobilizing the CCP to seize power inside the KMT "left."

A specific reflection of this was Bukharin's June 30, 1927 article in *Pravda* which was written immediately after General Feng Yü-hsiang, whom the Comintern had considered a "leftist," switched to Chiang Kai-shek's side<sup>89</sup> (Stalin, having familiarized himself with Bukharin's article, believed that it "turned out well").<sup>90</sup> The article called for the purging of "bourgeois riff-raff and renegades of every sort" from the KMT "left," and the organization of a "real Jacobin 'left'," i.e., a sort of Wuhan "revolutionary committee." The article devoted particular attention to the need for a "most decisive" struggle against traitors, and concluded that soon the leaders of the KMT "left" would also turn out to be "betrayers." At the same time, no mention was made of soviets, and the CCP was ordered not to withdraw from the KMT under any circumstances. After uniting with the "KMT lower ranks," the CCP was advised toward transforming itself into a "mighty worker-peasant . . . party, an organ of the democratic, plebeian revolution." As if protecting the ECCI against the inevitable failure of its political line in China, Bukharin at this time leveled a series of charges against CCP leaders, albeit still in a general form, and without directly mentioning the CCP. The most important of these was their "failure to implement" the "correct" directives of the Comintern, and also "inhibiting" the agrarian revolution and arming workers.

Soon afterwards, on July 8, the ECCI sent a directive, approved in advance by the Politburo, to the CCP Central Committee, demanding that Communists withdraw from membership in the KMT's Nationalist govern-

<sup>88</sup>Kosheleva, *Pis'ma I.V. Stalin V.I. Molotovu, 1925-1936*, 104. This phrase was translated incorrectly in the American edition of Stalin's letters. See Lih, *Stalin's Letters to Molotov*, 137.

<sup>89</sup>See Nikolai Bukharin, "Current Moment of the Chinese Revolution," *Pravda*, June 30, 1927.

<sup>90</sup>Lih, *Stalin's Letters to Molotov*, 138.

ment since "the main armed forces of Wuhan . . . have become the instrument of counterrevolutionaries." The ECCI, however, did not link the resignation of ministers who were members of the CCP with the withdrawal of the CCP from the KMT.<sup>91</sup> On the very same day, Stalin commented on this directive in a letter to Molotov: "We used the Wuhan leadership as much as possible. Now it is time to discard them. An attempt should be made to take over the periphery of the Kuomintang and help it oppose its current bosses."<sup>92</sup>

But this last directive, too, was powerless in altering the situation in China. Just like the leaders of the Wuhan government, the KMT "leftists" on the periphery were in no hurry to become "revolutionary Jacobins." On the contrary, everyone adhered more openly to an anticommunist position. The defeat of the CCP, and of Stalin's policy in China, became a reality.

### **Conclusion**

What was the cause of this failure? The answer, it seems, must be sought in the very concept of a "multi-class party" that Stalin armed himself with at the beginning of 1925. In practice, this concept led to intra-party collaboration with the KMT which for both the CCP and Stalin acquired a transcendent significance. Logically speaking, in accordance with this concept the Communists had to pursue one of two tactical lines inside the KMT—either offensive (with differing degrees of force) or defensive, depending on circumstances. In the first instance, i.e., in more favorable circumstances, they had to take advantage of their presence in the KMT to make the organization as "leftist" as possible; namely, change it into a "workers' and peasants' party." They were supposed to do this by ousting the representatives of the bourgeoisie from leadership positions, and then purging them from the party. Following this, they had to gain influence over their "petite bourgeois" allies in order to establish the "hegemony of

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<sup>91</sup>Russian Center 17/162/5/65-66.

<sup>92</sup>Lih, *Stalin's Letters to Molotov*, 139.

the proletariat" in China, directly via the KMT rather than the CCP. On the other hand, at periods when the Nationalists turned out to be stronger than the Communists, the CCP had the duty of making concessions, in essence limiting its own autonomy and political independence for the sake of safeguarding the Communists inside the KMT, the "people's" party.

Objectively speaking, the Chinese Communists turned out to be hostages of Stalin's line. On the one hand, the obligation to preserve intra-party cooperation with the Nationalists inevitably led to suppressing any questions concerning the price of such collaboration. On the other hand, from its position inside the KMT, the CCP was unable to struggle successfully for hegemony. Any step in that direction, or any attempt to take the offensive, no matter how "cautious," risked conflict with what was in fact a much stronger partner which relied, among other things, on its own armed forces. A clash could either lead to the splitting up of the "multi-class" party or simply to the expulsion of the Communists from the KMT. In this regard, the March 20 and April 12 events were serious warnings to the CCP.

Finding themselves prisoners of Stalin's paradigm, the CCP condemned itself to constant retreat in the face of its ally irrespective of what particular directives it received from Moscow. It was impossible to implement the orders to communize the KMT without risking breaking up the united front. Leaving the KMT would mean burying any hope of turning it into a "workers' and peasants' party." In essence, Stalin himself was trapped in a cul-de-sac. In this situation, no matter which way he turned, he had to be satisfied merely with the KMT's anti-imperialism until the end of June 1927. It was thus senseless to wax indignant about the failure of the Chinese Communists to implement the Comintern's directives, as Stalin's policy could not but lead to the cruelest defeat of the communist movement in China.