

Review of Gregor Benton (ed.) “Prophets Unarmed. Chinese Trotskyists in Revolution, War, Jail, and the Return from Limbo”

Leiden e.a., Brill, 2015. XVII, 1269 pp. (Historical Materialism Book Series. 81)

Monday 30 March 2020, by [SMITH Steve](#) (Date first published: 1 January 2020).

In only two countries - Sri Lanka and Bolivia - did Trotskyists ever rise to prominence in national politics, and they did so in remarkably ‘unTrotskyist’ ways, not least by joining Popular Front governments. In the communist parties of China and Vietnam, however, Trotskyists acquired influence well beyond their small numbers, and in ways that were never paralleled in the West.

It is true that the Socialist Workers’ Party in the USA claimed about 2000 members in 1937, but in Vietnam the *La Lutte* group claimed 3000 members two years later. In China there were never more than a thousand members of rival Trotskyist groups at the peak of their influence in the early 1930s, but the Comintern in Moscow regarded them with particular alarm and venom. This derived from the disastrous outcome of the policy pursued by the Comintern in China, which had forced a reluctant Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to join the much larger Nationalist Party (Guomindang, GMD) in 1923. During the national revolution of 1925–27, Chiang Kai-shek’s National Revolutionary Army reunified most of the country, while the Communists worked effectively to mobilize workers and peasants behind a radical programme of social reforms. It was this radicalization of the revolution on the ground that caused Chiang Kai-shek to launch a bloodbath against his erstwhile allies in April 1927. This disaster became a key issue in the power struggle that was then underway between Stalin and Trotsky within the Russian Communist Party. Rather belatedly, from 1926, Trotsky became a fierce critic of the policy of entryism foisted on the CCP and this won him supporters among the Chinese studying in Moscow. His supporters at the Communist University of the Toilers of the East (which operated from 1921 to the late 1930s) and at the Sun Yat-sen University (1925–30), an institution that included activists from the Nationalist Party, were among the first dissidents to be packed off to labour camps. The networks of Chinese Trotskyists in the Soviet Union would outlast those of Russian Trotskyists by almost two years.

Gregor Benton’s magnificent book tells the story of the battered and divided Trotskyist movement in China, taking its history through the unanticipated developments of a second united front between the CCP and the Nationalists against the Japanese in 1937; through the Second World War; the victory of the Nationalists in 1945; the civil war between the Nationalists and the CCP from 1946 to 1949; the victory of the Red Army in 1949; the mass arrest of Trotskyists by Mao’s government in 1952; and finally to the survival of Trotskyists abroad and in China in the post-Mao era. At 1269 pages, the book is a hugely comprehensive collection of memoirs, primary documentation and extracts from secondary works of history and of theoretical reflection. It is arranged in roughly chronological order, starting with a long introduction by Benton himself, followed by sections from the first well-researched and sympathetic history of Chinese Trotskyism by PRC historian Wu

Jimin. [1] There follow extracts from the memoirs of Wang Fanxi and Zheng Chaolin – both previously published as separate books; writings of the towering intellectual, co-founder of the CCP and one-time Trotskyist, Chen Duxiu; writings on China by Trotsky himself; more analytical writings by Chinese Trotskyists, seeking to understand the social nature of Mao Zedong's revolution and guerrilla warfare; extracts from more literary writings; and ending with some obituaries. The memoirs of Zheng Chaolin and Wang Fanxi, in particular, offer wonderful insight into, and much lively detail about, the early history of the CCP and about personalities and social networks in the Trotskyist movement of the 1930s. Wang Fanxi, for example, offers a terrifying account of his arrest and torture by the GMD in May 1937. All the material is superbly translated by Benton, and the referencing of events and personalities, together with the detailed index, is meticulous in a way that is quite exceptional these days.

The book is the culmination of Benton's life-long interest in the fate of Trotsky's supporters in China and in the Chinese diaspora. As the world's leading expert, he analyses the movement sympathetically and with great insight, but never uncritically. Chinese Trotskyism, like Trotskyism everywhere, was riven by factionalism, dogmatism and personal squabbles. Yet most of its supporters showed extraordinary courage, squeezed as they were between the repression of the Nationalists and the hostility of the CCP. Most lived lives of poverty and hardship; many spent years in prison, and many lost their lives at the hands of the Nationalists – who saw them as little different from Communists – or at the hands of the Japanese. Between May 1931 and October 1932, the four groups that then existed united at Trotsky's urging, but one member's betrayal led to the arrest of the main leaders and to more disunity. The major split was between the group associated with Peng Shuzhi, who had been an influential leader in the CCP in the second half of the 1920s, and that of Zheng Chaolin and Wang Fanxi, who seem, as much as anything, to have been irked by Peng's high-handed ways. Peng, alone of the Chinese Trotskyists, along with his wife, Chen Bilan, would go on to become a leading figure in the Fourth International after the war, first in Paris and then in Los Angeles.

Trotskyists throughout the world were wrong-footed by developments after 1945: the creation of 'workers' states' in Eastern Europe in the late 1940s; the triumph of a peasant-based revolution in China; the establishment of 'workers' self-management' in Yugoslavia; the post-war capitalist boom; the revolution in Cuba; the rise of student leftism, and movements for black power, women's and gay liberation. Already in the 1930s, however, Chinese Trotskyists had been forced to come to terms with a revolution in their country that developed in ways that entirely belied Trotsky's expectations. Not surprisingly, given the experience of the first united front, his followers shared the master's scepticism towards united fronts, at least as understood by Moscow. Yet some had difficulty coming to terms with Trotsky's call for a Constituent Assembly in 1928 and a 'democratic dictatorship' in China. Chinese Trotskyists engaged in debate about the nature of the mode of production in China – during the so-called 'social history debate' of the 1930s – tending to the view that capitalism was already the dominant force, and so they adhered to Trotsky's view that the proletariat must lead the revolution (something the CCP did not deny, although it interpreted this idea more metaphorically than literally). They were thus taken by surprise when a Red Army of peasants brought social revolution from the countryside to the cities during the civil war. Incidentally, it seems that there was relatively little interest in key Trotskyist concepts of permanent revolution or of a transitional programme – issues that stirred Trotskyists in the West from the 1930s through to the 1950s. What united all shades of the movement was a consistent critique of the Stalinist nature of Yan'an Communism.

Among the educated public, the significance of the small Trotskyist movement was amplified by the figure of Chen Duxiu, who threw in his lot with Trotskyism from 1929. Chen had been leader of the New Culture Movement from 1915 and the first secretary of the CCP, presiding over its first five

congresses. Chen was made the scapegoat for the failure of the first united front in 1927, which Moscow blamed on his supposed 'right opportunism'. During the 1930s, Chen suffered for his politics – he was in jail from 1933 to 1937 – but he also enjoyed a certain respect from gentry and urban intellectuals who were otherwise very opposed to his politics. His calligraphy, for example, was much admired, as were the six works he wrote in jail on classical Chinese phonology and linguistics. Chen was associated with Peng Shuzhi's group, but each went their separate way after their respective release from prison following the Japanese invasion. Chen Duxiu was too independent a thinker to follow Trotsky dogmatically: he remained unimpressed by the arguments in *Terrorism and Communism*, Trotsky's broadside against Kautsky, for example, and would later drop out of the Trotskyist movement altogether because of his strong belief in democracy as the bedrock of socialism. Wang Fanxi and Zheng Chaolin were by no means uncritical of Chen, yet they were broadly on his side in the struggle with the putative Trotskyist leadership in Shanghai.

Despite the comprehensive scope of the volume, there are a few important issues that are passed over fleetingly. The biggest armed conflict in which the Soviet Union was embroiled prior to 1939 came when it went to war with China in 1929 to retake the Chinese Eastern Railway after it had been seized by Zhang Xueliang, the Manchu warlord. Although the Karakhan declaration of July 1919 had identified Russian control of the railway as a manifestation of rampant tsarist imperialism, Trotsky backed Stalin in going to war to reclaim it (Chen Duxiu did not). Similarly, one could argue that the contribution of Liu Renjing, general secretary of the Communist Youth League from 1923 to 1925 and then the leading Left Oppositionist at the Lenin School in Moscow, is downplayed, probably because he later broke with Trotskyism and made his peace with the PRC government. But these are quibbles. All in all, this is a work of thorough and humane scholarship, and all of us are in debt to Benton for excavating the forgotten history of those who found themselves on the 'wrong side' of history.

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P.S.

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Footnotes

- [1] Wu Jimin: *Lianhu: Zhongguo Tuopai de kunan yu fendou* [Purgatory. The Chinese Trotskyists' Ordeal and Struggle], Singapore, Bafan wenhu chuanguo shi, 2008.