

Book Review, Gregor Benton Ed.: Trotskyism in China

Saturday 15 December 2018, by [HORE Charlie](#) (Date first published: December 2018).

Reviews of *Prophets Unarmed: Chinese Trotskyists in Revolution, War, Jail, and the Return from Limbo*. Edited by Gregor Benton. Haymarket Books, 2017 · 1,269 pages · \$55.00

Contents

- [The birth of the opposition](#)
- [Unification, prison, and war](#)
- [1949 and afterwards](#)
- [Conclusion](#)

In the early 1930s there were more Trotskyists in China than anywhere else outside Russia. The defeat of the Chinese revolution in 1927 was one of the decisive factors in the emergence of Trotskyism as a distinct body of thought, and a powerful influence in shifting Trotsky's views on the nature of Stalinism. It is thus hardly surprising that those who had been on the sharp end of the defeat should be especially receptive to his critique. And yet the history of Chinese Trotskyism is hardly known even among Trotskyists today. [1] This magisterial work, building on materials both previously translated and written by the editor, should do much to reverse that lack of knowledge. It is an inspiring story of perseverance against unimaginable odds to keep alive a revolutionary tradition.

There isn't space here to do anything more than sketch the history of the 1927 revolution, [2] but one thing was crucial to the rise of the Trotskyist opposition: the revolution was not just defeated, but betrayed.

Following the end of World War I, an upsurge in nationalist opposition to imperialist domination of China coincided with, and was strengthened by, a revolt among educated youth against the traditional values of the imperial system, which had collapsed in 1911 leaving no national authority in its place. As the movement deepened, it was joined by a newly awoken working class, whose numbers had increased greatly during the war, and soon began using strikes and boycotts against Chinese capitalists, as well as foreign ones. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was founded in 1920 as a product of this ferment and of the hopes aroused by the Bolshevik revolution in Russia. One of the two founders was Chen Duxiu, CCP leader in 1927, who would become a leading figure in the Trotskyist opposition.

In 1923 the CCP was instructed by the Communist International to join the Guomindang, the main nationalist party, not to take it over but "to do coolie work" for the nationalists, as Stalin put it. Although there were repeated objections from CCP members, the alliance held firm, largely because of the prestige of the Russian revolution but also because (it has to be said) the CCP was financially dependent on the Communist International. [3]

Russia also gave direct military support and training to the nationalists, whose army took advantage

of warlord infighting and the strength of the workers movement to first take over Guangdong province and then launch a Northern Expedition to take all of China.

The villages in the path of the Expedition exploded, and strikes spread to all major cities after a mass shooting of protesters. But the more the movement grew, the more it threatened to go beyond a simply nationalist revolution, and consequently the more the nationalists tried to restrain it. Restraint became bloody repression in the spring of 1927, when the nationalists marched into Shanghai on the back of a general strike. More and more repression followed, until by the end of the year the CCP had effectively ceased to exist in the cities.

Trotsky had opposed the CCP entering the Guomindang, and by late 1926 he was arguing for their immediate withdrawal, while conceding that such a move still “presupposes—under existing conditions—a political bloc with the Guomindang or with particular elements of it . . .” [4]

He would later write in *My Life* “the opposition could not rise on the defeat of the Chinese revolution. The fact that our forecast had proved correct might attract one thousand, five thousand or even ten thousand new supporters to us. But for the millions the significant thing was not one forecast, but the fact of the crushing of the Chinese proletariat.” [5]

The birth of the opposition

This proved to be all too accurate, but among the new supporters attracted were significant numbers of Chinese students in Moscow—and through them growing numbers of CCP members inside China [6]—who had access not just to Trotsky’s writings on China but also the wider works of the opposition to Stalin. Some even took part in the last public opposition demonstrations in November 1927. And despite the increasing repression following Stalin’s rise to full power the following month, Trotsky’s arguments found a growing audience among Chinese revolutionaries trying to understand the causes of their defeat.

Wang Fanxi, one of the founders of Chinese Trotskyism, whose memoirs make up a substantial part of this book, [7] wrote:

“In the winter of 1928, the Opposition rapidly expanded its organization among the Chinese students in Moscow. We had comrades everywhere: in the Lenin Institute, in the various military academies and, in particular, at Sun Yatsen University where out of a total of four hundred students about one hundred and fifty were Trotskyists, either as members or as close sympathizers . . .”

By 1930 almost all had been sent back to China, though the very last survivors disappeared into Stalin’s prison system. But there was no clear organization in China to draw them all together, and four separate groups emerged. Wang discusses them in detail in a chapter (478-503), which stresses that each “deliberately exaggerated our differences in order to justify the existence of our various factions” (482).

The differences were real, however, and one of the sharpest was over the role of Chen Duxiu. Chen was far and away the most important Communist to come over to the side of Trotsky, but for many younger Chinese revolutionaries his leadership of the CCP tainted him during the defeats of 1927. Chen himself was clearly scarred by his experiences, and loath to take a lead in the reorganization of the Chinese Trotskyists, looked instead to younger comrades to drive the process.

Among the most valuable sections in this book are two separate accounts of Chen’s political evolution and activity (586-693), as well as a selection of his later writings and letters (697-774).

The two accounts are by Wang and Zheng Chaolin, the latter another founder of the movement whose memoirs also make up a large part of this work. [8] Zheng was one of the first students to return to China in 1924, and worked closely with Chen throughout the revolution, witnessing a number of his clashes with the Russian advisors charged with ensuring the CCP's obedience. In contrast, Wang only returned to China after the defeats of 1927, and was initially among those who opposed Chen. Their differing perspectives do much to bring into focus this contradictory and independent-minded figure, a giant of the revolutionary tradition, who deserves to be far better known than he is. [9]

Unification, prison, and war

Although Chen played a key role in bringing the four groups together in one organization, he later developed major differences with the group's perspectives, and by his death in 1942 no longer considered himself a Trotskyist—though still a revolutionary. However, while Chen's role was important, it was Trotsky's that was decisive.

The terrain on which the Chinese Trotskyists were working in the early 1930s was confusing and hostile. The Guomindang's terror had destroyed the organized labor movement in Shanghai and Guangdong and made any open political activity impossible in the territory under their control. Central and northern China were under the control of contending warlords, while in the northeast, Japanese forces were advancing from late 1931 onwards. The British colony of Hong Kong and the International Settlement in Shanghai—a British-run enclave in the heart of the city—ironically offered the least dangerous environments, though the Settlement's police regularly handed over political prisoners to the Guomindang.

In early 1931 Trotsky wrote a letter to all the Trotskyist groups arguing for immediate unification—"fuse your organizations and your press definitively this very day!" [10]—which pushed the groups together, and produced a unified organization just five months later. The Chinese Left Opposition [11] brought together a claimed 483 militants [12] in a process that seemed to erase the old factional differences. Three weeks later, however, the Guomindang arrested almost the entire leadership, splintering the new organization. Some activity resumed in 1934 around the South African militant Frank Glass, [13] who was almost the only link to the Trotskyist movement elsewhere. By 1935 a new leadership had managed to establish a monthly journal and a more irregular theoretical publication, both of which survived until 1942, though the journal never managed a print run of more than 200 copies (513).

But the political landscape had shifted again, with Japan having attacked the Chinese-governed parts of Shanghai in 1932 and now occupying almost all of northern China. Nationalist feelings were running high, and in the summer of 1936 the CCP and Guomindang announced a new alliance to oppose Japan's invasion. The Trotskyists saw this—understandably, but wrongly—as an extension of the "popular front" policies that Communist parties were following in Europe and denounced the CCP for "abandoning" the Red Armies. In practice, Mao Zedong's strategy was quite the opposite, and in the war against Japan the CCP built the armies, which would bring them to power in 1949.

Frank Glass sent Trotsky a report on the state of the movement in early 1940, which is almost the only outsider's account that we have. [14] He noted, "Comrades differ in their estimation of our strength. Some put the figure at 500; others state that 200 is more accurate. The war has made it impossible to ascertain the correct position." He gave a bleak picture of the various repressive forces making activity difficult, but also stressed what they had managed to achieve: two more or less regular publications; numbers of leaflets; and translations of Trotsky, Victor Serge and Ignazio

Silone among others. Their activity had attracted a public attack from the CCP, which among the usual lies more inventively alleged, “almost all Trotskyites are homosexuals and hold orgies in bathhouses”!

Divisions had already opened up on the attitude that the Trotskyists should take toward the opposition to Japan, with Chen breaking with the group in favor of complete support for the “war of national resistance.” Individuals joined guerrilla groups and in two cases led them, but the organization as a whole took a position of critical support, though there was little they could do about this practically.

America’s declaration of war on Japan in 1941 led to a formal split, however, with one group arguing that the war in China had become part of an imperialist war, and that revolutionaries should therefore be opposed to all sides. Personal divisions going back to the mid-1920s (a constant thread running through this volume, unfortunately) undoubtedly deepened the split, but the political differences were clear enough. Wang and Zheng were both part of the minority, while the majority was led by Peng Shuzhi, whose rather self-serving account to the American SWP in 1947 is given here (followed by a response from Wang).

Japan’s surrender in August 1945 opened up again the possibility of open activity, though the ranks of both groups had been depleted by wars, prison, and attacks from both the Guomindang and the CCP. The two groups had between them half the numbers of those represented at the unification conference—something over 200 people, with most members in Shanghai. But both were able to gain a wider audience, with the minority producing a (short-lived) magazine with a print-run of 2,000 copies, while both moved toward declaring themselves a party.

The end of the war with Japan was followed almost immediately by the civil war, which pitted the CCP’s armies, massively strengthened by years of guerrilla warfare, and against the Guomindang armed by the USA. The Trotskyists shared the general view that the CCP could not win—as late as 1947 Wang could write that “the civil war is devoid of any perspective, and is even doomed to failure because of its Stalinist domination,” while the majority spoke of their coming defeat as “caused by the treacherous politics of the party [the CCP] and the Kremlin.”

1949 and afterwards

By 1949, however, the outcome was inevitable. The majority moved its leadership out of China to Hong Kong, while the minority voted to stay “based on the simple conviction that it was better for a revolutionary organization of the working class to go down fighting than quit the field without a contest.”

After 1949 an illegal journal was again published, and Trotskyists led strikes and other struggles in Shanghai and Guangdong, while the CCP both repressed and tried to co-opt them. But in December 1952, a coordinated national roundup arrested every known Trotskyist as well as many relatives and suspected sympathizers—something like a thousand people in all, according to Zheng. As far as is known, the repression was complete. Relatives and those who had no political connection were released, but those who stuck to their views were given long sentences and then sent to “reform-through-labor” farms or factories [15] after their formal release. In 1979 the last twelve surviving prisoners, including Zheng, were released.

How did they understand what had happened in 1949? According to Wang, he originally took a “bureaucratic collectivist” position, while Zheng saw the new regime as “state capitalist,” but by 1950 both had come around to a position of welcoming the revolution. [16] Wang adhered to the

postwar “orthodox Trotskyist” position that China, like the Stalinist states in eastern Europe, had become a “deformed workers’ state,” arguing that the CCP had somehow kept its character as a working-class party throughout the 1930s and 1940s and was thus still a revolutionary force.

Peng, who was to be for decades the Fourth International’s China spokesman, arrived at the same conclusion but by a different route. For him the CCP’s victory was largely due to exceptional circumstances, and he asserted that the move towards a workers’ state had happened because the CCP had been transformed through recruiting workers in the early 1950s. He finished his report to the FI’s Third World Congress in 1951 by arguing that the CCP was “in transition to a workers’ party” and that China was “moving in the direction of a deformed dictatorship of the proletariat.”

What neither grasped was that the CCP had become a nationalist party, and crucially a better nationalist party than the Guomindang, which was what had enabled it to become an independent force capable of imposing itself on Chinese society as a new ruling class. 1949 was indeed a revolution—but a nationalist one, not a working-class one.

Trotsky’s view that only the working class could lead a revolution that overthrew the landowners became a constricting dogma, arguing that because the landowners had been overthrown, the new regime must therefore be a working-class one. But if Mao’s Red Army could somehow “represent” the working class, then so could other groups of guerrillas or, for that matter, radical army officers. [17] In the process, the idea that the emancipation of the working class was necessarily the act of the working class slipped out of sight.

Could the Trotskyists have done anything differently to better their chances of having an influence on events? For Benton and Wang the answer is yes: they should have recognized that the locus of struggle had moved to the countryside and sought to build guerrilla groups as part of the resistance to Japan. Leaving aside the huge difficulties in transplanting a group of mostly urban intellectuals into the Chinese countryside in the 1930s (which, to be fair, both recognize), this misses the more basic point that the politics of collective working-class organization cannot simply be replicated among peasants. Being, as the saying goes, determines consciousness.

Elsewhere Benton describes well the evolution of the CCP: “A regular army was built up that, though less cruel and corrupt than the Guomindang forces, insisted like any army on discipline, regimentation, secrecy and a top-down structure of command. These qualities, which are radically incompatible with democracy, rubbed off thickly on the CCP; military norms increasingly came to rule political life in the Communist areas.” [18] Had the Trotskyists managed to implant themselves in the villages, it would have been almost impossible to prevent the same happening to them.

In reality, they were a tiny and isolated group of revolutionary socialists, living through some of the most momentous events of the twentieth century, and at different times persecuted by the Western powers in Shanghai and Hong Kong, and elsewhere by the Guomindang, the Japanese, and the CCP. That they survived at all is a major achievement.

Conclusion

In this short review I have concentrated on the basic history, but there is much more to discover in this marvelous volume—a long section on the Trotskyists and literature, for example, as well as some fascinating insights into life in revolutionary Russia in the mid-1920s. Two points are worth emphasizing in conclusion. The first is how readable this collection is. Twelve hundred pages looks impossibly daunting, but by presenting different voices in thematic sections the editor has made this a very approachable and readable work.

The second point is that while the overall arc of the narrative may be one of defeat, the tone is anything but. Wang and Zheng, in particular, are not mourning their fates but celebrating and critically analyzing both what they achieved and what they failed to achieve, as lessons offered to the future. We owe it to their memories to pay attention to this surely definitive account of a crucial part of our history.

Review by Charlie Hore

P.S.

- ISR, Issue #111, Winter 2018-19:
<https://isreview.org/issue/111/trotskyism-china>
-

Footnotes

[1] Chinese Trotskyism gets just two pages in Isaac Deutscher's *The Prophet Outcast*, and none in Tony Cliff's *The Darker the Night, the Brighter the Star*.

[2] The essential history is Harold Isaacs, *The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution*, most recently reprinted by Haymarket Books.

[3] "Expenses for the central organs of the party during the fall and winter of 1921 to 1922 had totalled 17,500 Chinese dollars, of which the Comintern had provided 16,665 dollars." Jonathan Spence, *Mao* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1999), 67.

[4] Leon Trotsky, *On China* (New York: Monad Books, 1976), 116. This is a much fuller collection of Trotsky's writings on China than the earlier collection *Problems of the Chinese Revolution* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1967). Problems, however, is available online: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1932/pcr/index.htm>. By early 1927, however, he was arguing for a strategy of building soviets in China, and following the massacre in Shanghai he insisted on the need for a different political strategy that opposed both imperialism and the Chinese bourgeoisie:

"The struggle against imperialism, precisely because of its economic and military power, demands a powerful exertion of forces from the very depths of the Chinese people. Really to arouse the workers and peasants against imperialism is possible only by connecting their basic and most profound life interests with the cause of the country's liberation . . . But everything that brings the oppressed and exploited masses of the toilers to their feet inevitably pushes the national bourgeoisie into an open bloc with the imperialists. The class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the masses of workers and peasants is not weakened, but, on the contrary, is sharpened by imperialist oppression, to the point of bloody civil war at every serious conflict."
[[Trotsky, *On China*, 161, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1932/pcr/01.htm>.

[5] Leon Trotsky, *My life* (London: Penguin Books, 1975) 553,
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/mylife/>. The quote is from chapter 42.

[6] Victor Serge asserted that these even included Mao Zedong, who "was very close to us in his

ideas, but . . . stayed close to the party to keep his supplies of weapons and munitions.” Victor Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2012), 257. His political opponents often described Mao as a “Trotskyite”, but this was simply a standard political insult. None of the biographies of Mao, nor this collection, repeat this assertion, and I think we have to conclude that Serge was misinformed.

[7] Originally published as *Wang Fanxi, Chinese Revolutionary: Memoirs 1919-1949* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), reissued with an additional final chapter as *Wang Fanxi, Memoirs of a Chinese Revolutionary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

[8] Zheng Chaolin, *An Oppositionist for Life* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1997). The chapter on Chen Duxiu in the present volume is, however, from *China's Urban Revolutionaries: Explorations in the History of Chinese Trotskyism*, edited by Gregor Benton (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1996).

[9] In English there is just one biography (Lee Feigon, *Chen Duxiu, Founder of the Chinese Communist Party*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983) and a collection of later writing from which the selections here are taken (*Chen Duxiu's Last Articles and Letters, 1937-1942*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1984).

[10] The letter is oddly not in this volume, but it is in Trotsky's *On China*, 492-500. Emphasis in the original.

[11] Formally, it was the Left Opposition of the Chinese Communist Party, as Trotsky's perspective was still reclaiming the Communist parties for revolutionary politics. By 1931 this was pretty much a dead letter everywhere, and it is notable that Trotsky's letter didn't mention the CCP. Apart from arguing for a critically supportive attitude to the peasant “Red Armies.”

[12] Figure from Benton (ed), *China's Urban Revolutionaries*, 35.

[13] Glass's story is told in Baruch Hirson, *The Restless Revolutionary* (London: Porcupine Press, 2003).

[14] First published in the journal *Revolutionary History*, vol.2, no.4, (Spring 1990), <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/revhist/backissu.htm>.

[15] A system where prisoners having served their formal sentences remain detained, though usually under less unpleasant conditions than in prison. Zheng Chaolin was sent to a glassworks in central Shanghai, where his wife joined him.

[16] Wang had somehow been in touch with the US Workers' Party, which had published his reply to Peng Shuzi's 1947 report. There seems to be no surviving record of his and Zheng's original positions.

[17] See Tony Cliff's 'Deflected Permanent Revolution' for an elaboration of this point: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1963/xx/permrev.htm>.

[18] Benton, *China's Urban Revolutionaries*, 117.