

3 | The Jiangxi Soviet 1928–34

When Mao and his fellow refugees from the White Terror (see page 60) reached the relative safety of the foothills of the Jinggang mountains in 1928, they began to organise the first **Chinese soviet**. Mao Zedong arrived in Jiangxi with certain advantages over his party rivals. His denunciation of the now discredited United Front had added greatly to his political reputation, while that of leaders such as Chen Duxui (Chen Tu-hsiu), who had advocated maintaining the Front, had correspondingly diminished. According to Mao's own writings, the White Terror had confirmed a judgement to which his experience as party organiser among the workers and peasants in Hunan province had already led him; namely, that co-operation with the GMD would destroy the Chinese Communist movement. He resolved that the CCP must revert to being a separate, independent force.

Mao's view of revolution

Mao's attitude was not simply a reaction to the evidence of Chiang's murderous intentions. He now judged that the United Front's revolutionary policy had been based on a false reading of the situation in China. The GMD, under direction from the Comintern, had adopted a strategy of urban revolution, which the CCP had then sanctioned by its willingness to form the Front. Yet, for Mao, the real China was not urban but rural. It was a simple matter of population distribution. The Front's policy of fomenting insurrection in the cities and towns ignored a stark reality – the great mass of the Chinese people were peasants living in the countryside.

In the official CCP histories that were written later, Mao's claims that he had opposed the policy of the United Front were accepted at face value. His judgement was praised on two counts:

- that he realised early on that the GMD was concerned solely with establishing its own dominance
- that he had grasped the key fact that the distribution of the population in China meant that revolution had to come from the rural not the urban areas.

This second point was of crucial importance since it directly contradicted the Comintern's instruction that revolution had first to be pursued in the towns and cities. However, more recent analyses suggest that Mao's account may have been a matter of *post facto* self-justification. Mao did not become fully committed to rural revolution until the later 1920s after his experience of the CCP's failure in the towns. Moreover, he had fully supported the United Front until, with the launching of Chiang Kaishek's White Terror in 1927, its threat to the CCP became evident.

Regardless of the arguments about the precise timing of Mao's conversion to the notion of peasant revolution, what is true is that the statistics clearly illustrate the accuracy of his judgement (see Figure 3.1).

Key question
Why were the Jiangxi years such a critical period for Mao and the CCP?

Jiangxi Soviet:
1928–34

Key date

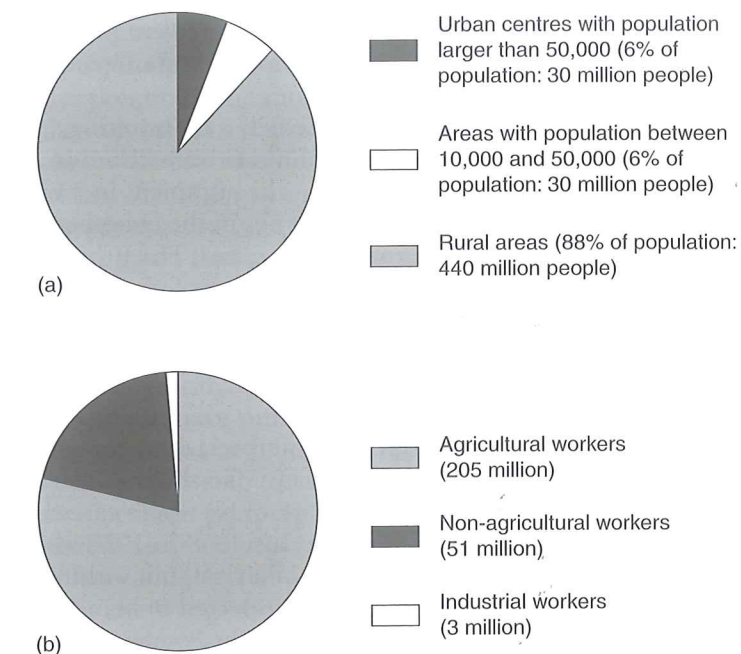
Key question
What was Mao's assessment of the revolutionary situation in China?

Chinese soviet
Originally meaning a council in Russian, the word soviet came to be applied to Communist organisations and bases which Mao set up.

Post facto
After the event.

Key terms

Figure 3.1:
(a) Location of the population of China in 1933 (500 million people). (b) Labour sectors for a total workforce of 259 million in 1933.



Mao's view of the Chinese peasants

Mao, unimpressed by Soviet Marxist orthodoxy and in defiance of Comintern instructions, made the peasants the dynamic of the Chinese revolution. In his own words: 'If we allot 10 points to the revolution, then the urban dwellers rate only three points, while the remaining seven points must go to the peasants.' It was Mao's belief in the truly revolutionary potential of the peasantry that inspired his organisation of the CCP's Jiangxi base between 1928 and 1934. In this period he taught his small but growing band of **Reds** that there was no necessity to wait for the growth of an industrial proletariat in China. Genuine revolution would be achieved by the peasants:

Within a short time, hundreds of millions of peasants will rise in central, south, and north China with the fury of a hurricane; no power, however strong, can restrain them. They will break all the shackles that bind them and rush towards the road of liberation. All imperialists, warlords, corrupt officials, and bad gentry will meet their doom at the hands of the peasants. All revolutionary parties and comrades will be judged by them.

Mao told his followers that it was their task to unleash the huge potential of the peasantry: 'The peasants are the sea; we are the fish. The sea is our habitat.' Mao had already begun the process of shaping Marxism to fit the Chinese situation. This put him at variance with the orthodox urban Communists, such as **Li Lisan** and Chen Duxui, who continued to follow the Moscow line in

Key question
What revolutionary role did Mao ascribe to the peasants?

Reds
A term adopted by Mao's Communists to describe themselves, red being the colour of revolutionary fervour.

Li Lisan (1899–1967)
A Moscow-trained Communist who pushed the Comintern view (the 'Li Lisan line'), which demanded that the CCP concentrate its revolutionary activities in the urban areas.

Key term

Key figure

asserting that revolution was a logical progression whose stages could not be skipped at will. Frequent attempts were made by the hardliners to make Mao conform. He was accused of 'reckless adventurism'.

Yet, Mao, as leader of the Jiangxi Soviet, was recruiting peasants into the ranks of the party at a rate unmatched in any other CCP-held areas. He was winning the argument in a very practical way. The truth was that it was not in the cities but in the countryside that the CCP was making its gains. The urban Communists began to appear increasingly out of touch with the real situation in China. Their orthodox theories counted for little in the face of Mao's manifestly successful approach.

The Futian Incident 1930

In insisting on the correctness of his interpretations and in fighting for his position within the party, Mao showed a terrifying ruthlessness which remained a hallmark of his whole career. A fearful example of this was the 'Futian Incident' in 1930 when he conducted a violent two-month purge of a rival unit within the Jiangxi Red Army, whose members he suspected of being either GMD agents or supporters of Li Lisan. In the course of crushing what he regarded as a military and political revolt, Mao Zedong ordered the torture and execution of nearly 3000 officers and men. A CCP report gave this description of the way information and evidence was extracted from suspects:

The method used was the carrot and the stick. The 'carrot' meant extracting confession by guile. The 'stick' meant thrashing suspects with ox-tailed sticks and hanging them up by their hands. If that had no effect, next came burning with incense or kerosene [paraffin] lamp. The worst method was to nail a person's palms to a table and then to insert bamboo splints under the fingernails. Torture ceased only after confession.

Maoist sympathisers have argued that rather than being an example of Mao's vindictiveness, Futian illustrates his grip on realities and his willingness to take hard decisions, qualities without which he could not have survived in the desperate circumstances he faced. Less sympathetic commentators regard Futian as an expression of Mao's uncompromising determination to eliminate rivals who blocked his path to personal power. They point to a particularly sinister aspect of Mao's tactics – his use of secret police to root out and expose the ringleaders of the revolt.

Party struggles at Jiangxi

The Futian Incident did not end the opposition to Mao. Throughout the Jiangxi years he was involved in an ongoing battle to assert his authority within the party. His major challengers were **Wang Ming** and **Bo Gu**. In the early 1930s, these men were part of the 'Wang Ming faction', also known as the **Twenty-eight Bolsheviks**. The core of their challenge was

Twenty-eight Bolsheviks

A particular set of Communists who had been trained in Moscow and came back to China with instructions to make the CCP conform to Soviet and Comintern concepts of revolution

Key question

What did the Futian Incident reveal about Mao's approach to leadership?

Futian Incident: 1930

Wang Ming (1904–74)

A pro-Moscow Communist hardliner who never fully accepted Mao's essentially Chinese interpretation of Marxism.

Bo Gu (1907–46)

One of the 'Twenty-eight Bolsheviks', he came to have a working but uneasy relationship with Mao.

Key question

What internal opposition did Mao contend with at Jiangxi?

Key term

Key date

Key figures

basically the same as the one advanced in the Li Lisan line; Mao was criticised by the pro-Moscow elements in the party for ignoring Comintern instructions and acting independently. A particular point of contention was Mao's insistence that the particular conditions in China determined that revolution must first come in the countryside; he rejected the Comintern's demand that the CCP put all its efforts into preparing risings in the urban areas.

Wang Ming and Bo Gu caused considerable trouble for Mao; on a number of occasions they tried to isolate him by suggesting that he was defying the will of the party by not following a **Stalinist line** in his approach to the peasants. Mao's response was always to point out that foreign Communists, no matter how eminent, did not have sufficient knowledge of China to dictate what policies should be followed. He spoke out against the Chinese peasants' being too severely treated, drawing a distinction between grasping landlords, who deserved to be dispossessed, and rich peasants' who could be persuaded to give up their land and join the peasant movement. For this, he was attacked by the Wang Ming faction as a **Rightist**.

Mao survived such criticism thanks largely to three factors:

- He was one of the outstanding generals in the party. The CCP could not cope without his military skills and those of his loyal Red Army commander Zhu De.
- As a result of his field research, Mao had an unrivalled knowledge of the Chinese peasantry. This meant he dominated any discussion of the party's peasant policy.
- By 1934, such was the Nationalist threat to Jiangxi that squabbles over party policy became secondary to the sheer necessity of physical survival.

The GMD's encirclement campaigns 1929–34

The CCP's internal rivalries took place against the background of the Nationalists' constant effort to crush the Jiangxi base. Chiang, who was similarly troubled by factional difficulties within his own party, was nonetheless resolute in pursuing the Communists. He was still intent on completing the White Terror. In 1929, on the recommendation of his **German military advisers**, he adopted a series of encirclement campaigns aimed at denying resources to the Reds until they finally broke. The encirclement was achieved by squeezing the Communists into an ever-shrinking area by targeted aerial bombing and by means of **pillboxes** (see page 74) and manned blocks on the roads and waterways leading in and out of the CCP strongholds.

The massive siege began to work. By 1934, a succession of serious defeats for the Reds convinced Mao that to continue to defend the Jiangxi base would prove suicidal. He was no more prepared to listen to those in the party who argued that they should stay and die as revolutionary heroes than he had been at the time of the White Terror seven years earlier. Mao then agreed with the collective decision that was taken to make a desperate

Key terms

Stalinist line

In the Soviet Union in the 1930s, Stalin was completing a ferocious policy of collectivisation, which involved stripping the peasants of their property and removing those who resisted.

Rightist

A derogatory term that lacked specific meaning but was used to attack CCP members thought to be anti-revolutionary.

Key date

GMD's encirclement campaigns: 1929–34

Key question

What strategy did Chiang's Nationalists employ in their campaigns to destroy the Reds at Jiangxi?

Key term

German military advisers

In building up the GMD's armed forces after 1928, Chiang relied heavily on German military experts to train his army and navy.

breakout. No fixed destination was selected since there was no known base to which the fliers could safely transfer. The initial aim was simply to escape. Decisions on where to head for could be made later.

It was in this confused fashion that the Reds departed on what was to prove one of the great odysseys of history, the Long March. In a pretence that the decision to flee Jiangxi was made freely rather than being forced on them by the GMD's encirclement, the CCP announced that 'the Chinese Red Army of workers and peasants has chosen to march north to resist the **Japanese incursion**'. The main body of marchers, which Mao later joined, set off in October 1934.

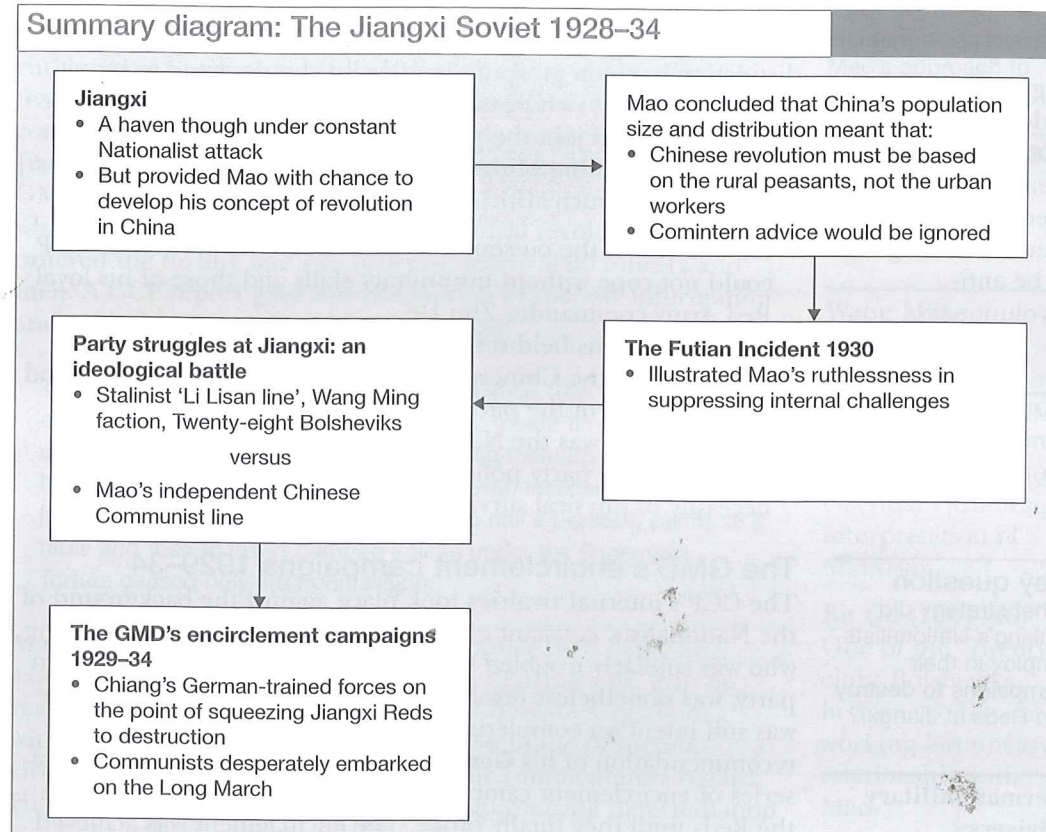
Pillboxes

Small, rounded turrets made of thick concrete and containing narrow apertures through which machine guns, operated by one or two men, could traverse a full 360°.

Japanese incursion

The occupation of Manchuria.

Key terms



4 | The Long March 1934–5

What began as a rout ended as a legend. After a year's desperate marching, the Communists finally reached sanctuary in Yanan in Shaanxi province. Even after allowing for the hyperbole and exaggeration that has become attached to the Long March, the feat remains an extraordinary one. It is worth noting its outstanding characteristics:

- The journey from Jiangxi to Yanan took a year, from October 1934 to October 1935.

Key question

What consequences did the Long March have for Mao and the CCP?

The Long March: 1934–5

Key date

- The distance covered was 6250 miles – the equivalent of marching from London to Lagos, or New York to Los Angeles, and back, at an average of 17 miles per day.
- The march crossed 11 provinces, 18 mountain ranges, 24 rivers, and numerous desert areas and quick sands.
- The marchers fought 15 pitched battles and almost daily skirmishes against the GMD forces trying to destroy them.
- In the course of the march, over 60 towns and cities were occupied.
- Of the 100,000 who set out scarcely 20,000 survived to reach Yanan.

The sheer physical scale of the Long March helped to give it a political significance, which Mao defined in these terms:

It is a manifesto, an agitation corps, a seeding machine. It proclaims to the world that the Red Army is an army of heroes. It announces the bankruptcy of the encirclement attempted by the imperialists and Chiang Kaishek. It declares to approximately 200 million people of 11 provinces that only the road of the Red Army leads to their liberation. It has sown many seeds in 11 provinces, which will sprout, grow leaves, blossom into flowers, bear fruit and yield a crop in future. The Long March ended with our victory and the enemy's defeat.

The concept of martyrdom for the cause became enshrined in Communist lore. Comradeship, dedication and self-sacrifice were now the watchwords of the party. The march created a brotherhood among the survivors; all the leaders of the Chinese People's Republic from 1949 until the mid-1990s were veterans of the Long March: Mao Zedong, Zhu De, Zhou Enlai, Lin Biao, Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping. The marchers, with their willingness to undergo suffering without complaint, were an extraordinary example of the Confucian principle of accepting and adapting to whatever fate brings. The poems Mao wrote during the march were very much in the Chinese literary tradition of embracing nature as a measure of human achievement:

I desire to compare our height with the skies;
In clear weather, the earth is so charming,
Like a red-faced girl clothed in white.
Such is the charm of these rivers and mountains,
Calling innumerable heroes to vie with each other in pursuing her.
The emperors Shih Huang and Wu Ti were barely cultured,
The emperors Tai Tsung and Tai Tsu were lacking in feeling,
Genghis Khan knew only how to bend his bow at the eagles.
These all belong to the past – only today are there men of feeling!