

The warlord record

Despite its manifest tyranny, there were some positive features to warlord rule. Advances were made on a number of fronts.

Economic

Some of the warlords had modern ideas regarding agriculture and industry. Zhang Zuolin adopted an industrial development programme with the specific intention of preventing a Japanese economic takeover of Manchuria. Yan Xishan introduced industrial training schemes and endeavoured to improve the quality and range of local services in Shanxi province.

Political

The warlord period was important for the reaction it produced. The disunity and distress that characterised the time intensified nationalist feelings in China. This produced a solidarity among Chinese **radicals** and gave direction and purpose to a revolutionary movement that otherwise might have continued to dissipate itself in factionalism and local rivalries.

Cultural

It was no accident that China's **literary and intellectual renaissance** reached its high point in the 1920s – the worst years of warlord rule. As evident in the 4 May Movement (see page 37), the humiliation of the nation at the hands of warlords and foreigners gave the Chinese a common sense of grievance. It was this that eventually checked the fragmentation of Republican China by providing a cause around which the Chinese could unite. Ultimately, the two major revolutionary parties, the GMD and the CCP, would engage in a long and violent struggle for supremacy, but what united them initially was their shared resentment against warlord rule.

Radicals

Those Chinese who believed that sweeping political and social changes were necessary if China was to be truly modernised.

Literary and intellectual renaissance

In the 1920s, there was a huge increase among Chinese writers and artists of works dealing with China's national identity and character.

Key terms

Summary diagram: The warlord era 1916–27

Circumstances encouraging warlordism

- Weakness of central government after 1916
- Presence in China of powerful individual military leaders
- Rivalry between Republican government in the north and the GMD in the south
- Foreign readiness to liaise with influential warlords

Common features of warlord rule

- Power of individual warlords in their own regions
- Collaboration of political parties with the warlords
- Suppression and suffering of people in the warlord areas

Some positive results of warlordism

- Industrial and economic reforms in certain areas
- Intensifying of resolve among opponents of warlord rule to create a lawful, civil society
- Anti-warlord grievances stimulated an intellectual renaissance

3 | The 4 May Movement 1919–25

The term, the 4 May Movement, refers to the sustained feeling of resentment in China against Japan in particular and the imperialist occupiers in general. This reaction was most notable among China's intellectuals, who, disillusioned by the failure of the 1911 Revolution and the Republic to achieve real advances for the country, were further dismayed by the refusal of the West in 1919 to extend the principle of **self-determination** to China. The 4 May Movement was of central importance in Chinese politics between 1919 and 1927 and played its part in preparing the ground for the reorganisation of the GMD in 1919 and the creation of the CCP in 1921. It took its name from the first day of the violent demonstration in Beijing, which followed the news of China's humiliation at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 (see page 38).

Western attitudes towards China 1914–19

To understand how China came to be humiliated it is necessary to examine the attitude of the Allied powers – France, Russia and Britain – towards China between 1914 and 1919. At the start of the European struggle in 1914, the Allies had urged both China and Japan to declare war on Germany. Japan did so, but then put pressure on the Beijing government to delay its entry into the war. The Japanese motive was to prevent China's improving its international standing. In addition, Japan obtained from the British a secret promise that they would not press for China's entry without first consulting **Tokyo**. Armed with this guarantee, Japan then, in the first month of the war, seized the German territories in China, including Shandong province with its key port of Qingdao. At the time, the Japanese declared that these possessions would eventually be returned to China, but the emptiness of that promise became evident in 1915 when Japan's notorious 21 Demands threatened to reduce China to a Japanese **vassal state** (see page 29).

Britain's reluctance to take China's side at this point arose from its concern to avoid offending Japan as a major war ally. By 1915 it was becoming clear that the European war would be a protracted one. Britain and the Allies simply could not afford to risk losing Japan's support. However, it was this same reason, the mounting demands of the war effort, that led the Allies in 1917 to renew their appeal to China to join the hostilities against Germany. Up to that year the Chinese had maintained their neutrality. If the Chinese were to be persuaded to join the war they would have to be convinced that an Allied victory would guarantee their recovery of the disputed territories that Japan had seized.

US involvement

The Americans played a key role at this juncture. Having themselves joined the war against Germany in April 1917, they urged China to do the same. The USA suggested to the Chinese

Key question

In what sense was the 4 May Movement an expression of Chinese nationalism?

Key date

4 May Movement began: 1919

Key question

How was China regarded by the West?

Key terms

Self-determination

The principle that nations were entitled to shape and plan their own development free from outside interference and direction.

Tokyo

Japan's capital city and centre of government.

Vassal state

A nation effectively under the control of another state.

that if they fought for the Allies this would earn them a place at the post-war conference table where they would be in a position to claim their rights. Many Chinese, including Sun Yatsen and the GMD, remained unconvinced by this American analysis. Nevertheless, the Beijing government judged that the USA, which under its president, Woodrow Wilson, had entered the war avowedly 'to make the world safe for democracy', was more to be trusted than the European Allies. Strengthened by a substantial US loan, China formally declared war on Germany in August 1917.

This time Japan raised no objection, not because it now accepted China's territorial rights but because it had already obtained formal commitments from the Western Allies that they would continue to recognise the priority of Japanese claims to German possessions in China. Britain, France, Russia and Italy had all given secret pledges to support Japan in any post-war settlement.

More significant still, the Chinese had already been betrayed from within. Duan Qirui, China's premier and chief representative in the negotiations with the Western powers, had attempted to win Japanese backing so as to strengthen his position as head of the Beijing government in the uncertain period that followed Yuan Shikai's death. In return for Japanese loans and military aid, Duan agreed in secret talks that his government would fully recognise Japan's special privileges in China. This was extended into a formal Sino-Japanese military alliance early in 1918, a one-sided agreement that simply formalised Japan's superiority over China in the way that previous 'unequal treaties' had (see page 7).

The Allied treatment of China during and after the war

After entering the European war China played no direct role in the fighting, but its contribution to the Allied effort was far from insignificant. Over 150,000 Chinese volunteers went to the Western front where, in addition to working in munitions factories, they dug graves and maintained 90 miles of Anglo-French trenches. The Chinese believed that such endeavour would be rewarded by favourable attention being given to their claims in the post-war settlement. However, the Allies saw the Chinese as mere **coolies**, who, when the war ended on the Western Front in November 1918, were made to stay in Europe as labourers clearing up war damage.

The disdain of the Allies became even more evident at the **Versailles Conference**. Late in April 1919, the victorious Allies, gathered at Versailles in France, dismissively informed the Chinese that Germany's concessionary rights in Shandong province were not to be returned to China but were to be transferred instead to Japan. This was a direct reneging on the promise made to Duan Qirui by the Allies in the previous year, the commitment which had finally persuaded China to enter the

Sino-Japanese
military alliance: 1918

Key date

Coolies
Used disparagingly to denote the contempt many in the West felt towards the Chinese as perceived inferiors.

Key terms

Versailles Conference
The meeting of the victor nations at Versailles in France in 1919 to draw up the peace treaty and reshape the map of Europe.

First World War on their side in 1917. The Chinese delegation refused to accept the settlement but were powerless to prevent its becoming part of the Versailles Treaty. Their protests were simply ignored. The Chinese had gone to Versailles hoping to achieve three main results:

- the return of Shandong to China
- the withdrawal of the foreign concessions in China
- the cancellation of Japan's 21 Demands of 1915.

In the event, they had gained none of these. When the news of the Versailles betrayal reached China there was an explosion of anger. How intense the Chinese sense of nationalism could be when outraged had been shown in 1915 in the disturbances that had followed Yuan Shikai's acceptance of Japan's 21 Demands. China's major cities now experienced the same reaction. Chinese protesters took to the streets, to vent their rage against the Allies, the Japanese, and also against the Chinese government that had been unable to prevent the humiliation at Versailles. Government ministers were physically attacked and anti-Japanese boycotts were organised in Beijing and Shanghai. Within a month the protests had spread to 20 provinces and demonstrations and strikes occurred in over 100 towns and cities. The Chinese government delayed its formal ending of the war with Germany until September 1919 and it was another four years before China signed a separate treaty with Germany. But this gesture of independence failed to mollify the protesters. A Western observer described the turmoil in Beijing:

All the educational institutions struck, formed processions and marched around the city. They intended to hold a mass meeting in the central park, but the police and military drove them back and made numerous arrests. This was the greatest mistake the government could have made, for if the students had been allowed to hold the meeting they would not have had the opportunity of making themselves martyrs.

During the next few days excited students could be seen in small parties in every street, working themselves into a state of delirium by telling the passers-by of the indignities being thrust upon them through the fault of the pro-Japanese members of the Cabinet, whom they rightly stated were nothing more than the paid agents of Japan.

This movement is the strongest move of its kind that the Chinese have made. Not only has it spread all over China, but in Australia, Singapore, Hong Kong, Vladivostok, and even as far as America. Already it has caused great alarm in Japan. This boycott is different to all others. On previous occasions it has been the Chinese merchants who have been the mainstay of such attempts, but this time it is the consumer who is carrying it on.



A gathering of 4 May protesters in front of the Tiananmen Gate in Beijing. Their banners bear such slogans as 'Reject the Versailles Treaty', 'Down with China's Internal Traitors', 'Destroy the 21 Demands', 'No Trade with Japan'. In what way do the slogans illustrate the feelings of the demonstrators?

The passion and purpose of the demonstrators was typified in a Shanghai incident in which one of the student protesters ran out of red paint while writing the slogan 'Give us back **Qingdao**' in large characters on a white sheet. He bit into his arm at the elbow and tore the flesh away down to his wrist. He then wiped his brush along his bleeding arm so that he could finish the banner with his own blood. Onlookers applauded.

Longer term consequences

The most significant aspect of the 4 May reaction was the response of Chinese students and intellectuals. The radical thinkers in the universities turned even more eagerly to revolutionary theory to justify their resistance. What the 4 May Movement did in the 1920s was to give a sense of direction to radicals and revolutionaries who regarded the ejection of the foreigner as a necessary stage in China's regeneration. Anti-Western and anti-Japanese demonstrations continued to occur throughout the early 1920s. The authorities managed to contain the unrest but what they could not control were the growing doubts about the ability of the Republican government to represent China's true interests. It was such doubts that provided fertile opportunities for radicals to spread their propaganda.

Qingdao

A major port in Shandong province, also the birthplace of Confucius.

Key term

Summary diagram: The 4 May Movement 1919–25

Long-term causes

- Chinese resentment at subjection to foreigners
- Chinese disillusion with the Republic's record
- Allies' disdainful dismissal of Chinese war effort

Immediate occasion

- The rejection by the Allies at Versailles of:
- China's claim for restoration of its territories
 - The failure to extend the self-determination principle to the Chinese people
 - China's demand for the abrogation of Japan's 21 Demands

Long-term consequences

- Encouragement of radical and revolutionary ideas in China
- Strengthened the GMD
- Prepared the ground for Chinese Communism

Features

- Outrage among Chinese nationalists and progressives
- Fierce anti-foreigner feelings
- Particular anger against Japan
- Frustration with impotent Republican government

Key question

In what ways did Sun Yatsen shape the GMD in this period?

4 | The Nationalists (GMD) Under Sun Yatsen 1912–25

The intense patriotism that the 4 May Movement stimulated proved of major benefit to Sun Yatsen. Disappointed by his failure to make the best of the 1911–12 revolution (see page 28), Sun had resolved to reform and reinvigorate the GMD. Debarred from China for much of the period 1912–20, he spent a large part of the time in Japan reorganising his party with Japanese support. It is interesting to note that not all Japanese were happy with their country's domination of China. A small but significant minority believed that the genuine liberation of Asia from foreign control required that Japan and China should act together in a common anti-Western policy. As a practical expression of that belief, 600 Japanese students had gone to China in 1911–12 to join the revolution there.

However, the collapse of the Manchu dynasty made little immediate difference to China's subordination to Japan. The rivalry between Yuan Shikai and Sun Yatsen and the weakness of the early Republic left the Tokyo government unimpressed by China's efforts at recovery. The notion of mutual Sino-Japanese interests did not entirely disappear but the prevailing view in Tokyo was that the chronic weakness of China called for a policy of exploitation not co-operation. Nevertheless, Japan continued to be a haven for exiled Chinese revolutionaries.