

6 | The GMD-CCP United Front 1924-7

The CCP, although a tiny party numerically, containing only 50 members in 1921, had some success during the next two years in organising strikes and boycotts in Shanghai and Hong Kong. However, its attempt in 1923 to organise a railway stoppage in the Beijing region, an area under the control of the warlord Zhang Zuolin (see page 35), was a calamitous failure. It was the CCP's ineffectiveness in the face of warlord power that convinced the Comintern that the Chinese Communists were incapable of being a genuinely revolutionary force on their own. The way forward, it argued, was for the CCP to ally itself with the other major revolutionary party in China, the GMD. The Comintern urged the young Communist Party to co-operate with Sun Yatsen, whose brand of socialism it interpreted as wholly compatible with Marxism. In 1923, the Comintern agents, Adolf Joffe and Michael Borodin, made direct contact with the GMD, offering to assist with money and military supplies.

Sun Yatsen and the Comintern

For his part, Sun Yatsen was very willing to respond to Moscow's overtures. Confronted by powerful warlords, his GMD government in Guangzhou was finding it difficult to make good its claim to authority in southern China. Furthermore, Sun genuinely admired the structure and discipline of the Russian Bolshevik Party. He saw common ground between their revolutionary programme and his own 'Three Principles of the People'. He accepted the requests of the Comintern that the members of the young CCP should be allowed to join the GMD. Sun hoped that such co-operation would encourage Moscow to continue supplying the GMD with money and ammunition. The outcome was a pact of friendship between Moscow and the GMD in 1923. This prompted the Comintern advisers in China to renew their call to the CCP to throw in their lot with the Nationalists in advancing a broad-front revolutionary force in China.

The Soviet Union's attitude towards China

The Soviet Union's willingness to support the Nationalists and its urging of the Chinese Communists to form an alliance with the GMD are explained by its broader international concerns. Feeling vulnerable in a hostile world, the Soviet Union was concerned to safeguard its Far Eastern frontiers. Co-operation with the GMD was more likely to secure Russian interests in Mongolia and thus preserve it as a buffer against the growing strength of Japan. It was such thinking that lay behind the Soviet Union's seizure of Outer Mongolia in 1924 from China and its insistence that the Beijing government recognise its right to retain hold of the Chinese Eastern Railway, which provided the **trans-Siberian railway** with a short-cut to its Pacific terminus. These moves were clear evidence that, when it came to a question of its own national concerns, Soviet Russia was less than wholly committed to the

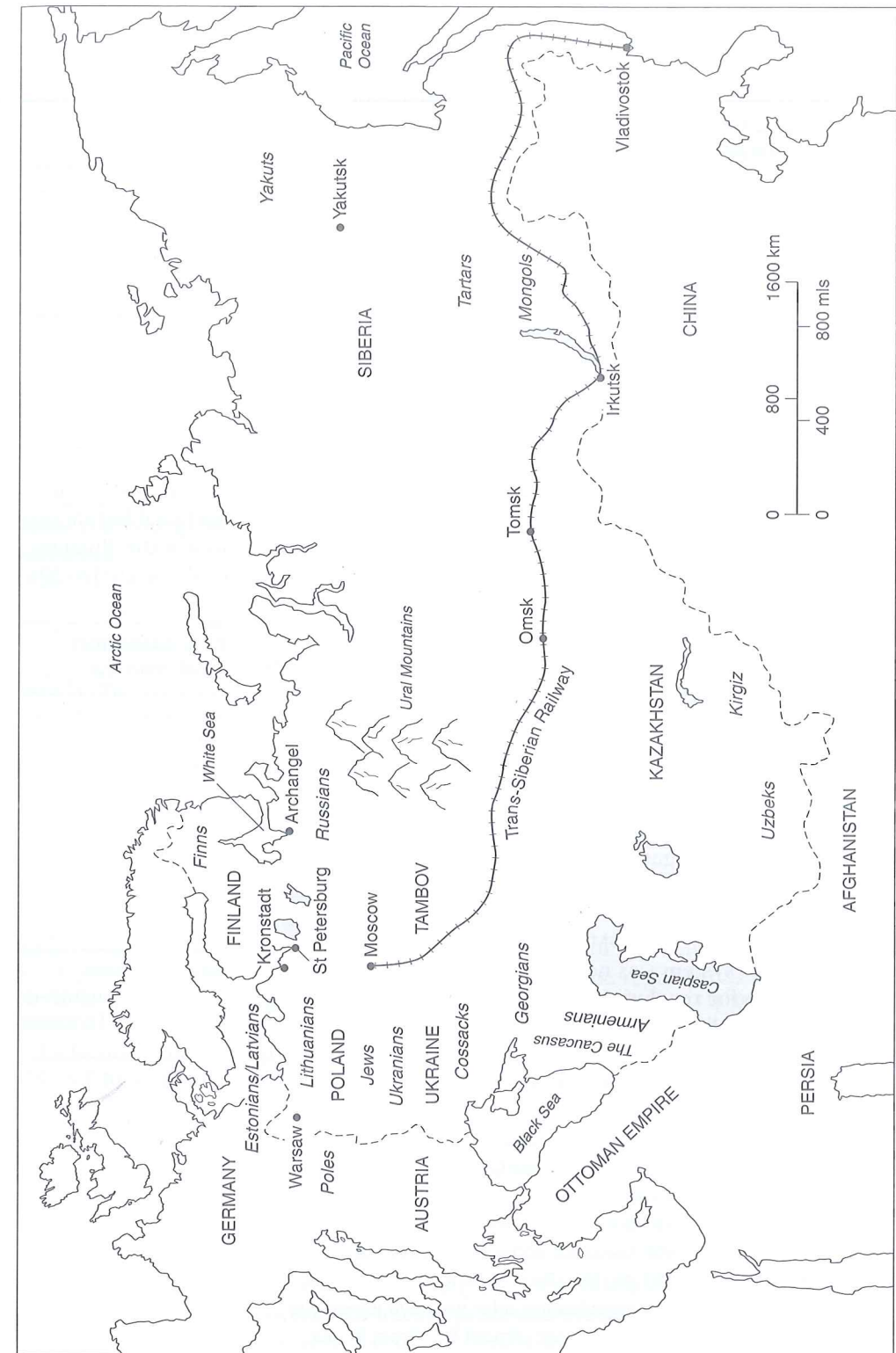
Key question
What factors led to the formation of the United Front in 1924?

Key question
Why was Sun willing to co-operate with the Comintern?

Key dates
Pact of friendship between Moscow and the GMD: 1923
USSR's seizure of Outer Mongolia: 1924

Key question
What motives lay behind the Soviet Union's involvement in revolutionary China?

Key term
Trans-Siberian railway
Stretched 3750 miles from Moscow to Vladivostok, connecting Russia's European and Asian territories.



China, Russia and the trans-Siberian railway.

proletarian principle it had proclaimed in 1918 of abandoning all claims to foreign territory.

Political divisions and conflict within China suited the USSR, which had been willing initially to give aid to some of the stronger warlords, General Feng in northern China being an example. The Comintern had even considered asking the CCP to ally with the more powerful warlords, but it subsequently saw greater prospects in urging an alliance with the Nationalists. The Comintern's belief that the revolutionary future lay with the Nationalists was shown by the efforts it put into reorganising the GMD along Soviet lines. In 1924, Borodin played a major role in drafting a new GMD constitution, which, out of deference to Sun Yatsen, was nominally based on the 'Three Principles of the People', but which was clearly Leninist in character.

In keeping with Lenin's concept of **democratic centralism**, power was concentrated in the hands of the leaders and great emphasis was placed on the need for an effective GMD army. Pointing to the success of the **Red Army** in Russia, the Comintern argued that, without a similar military organisation, the Chinese revolutionaries would be incapable of overcoming either the warlords or the imperialist occupiers.

Chinese Communist arguments for alliance with the Nationalists

Initially, a majority of the Chinese Communists believed that a common front between themselves and the Nationalists was the best means of both destroying the warlords and expelling the foreigners, aims which were fundamental to all revolutionaries. It is important to stress that the CCP and GMD were both revolutionary parties. The Nationalists under Chiang Kaishek would later come to be regarded as reactionaries, but it is noteworthy how progressive many of them originally were. That is certainly how they were seen by Moscow, which eased the CCP's path to co-operation with the GMD by acknowledging that the creation of a **soviet system** was not immediately necessary in China; the priority for revolution was national unity against the warlords and imperialists. This view was formally adopted as party policy by the CCP at both its second and third congresses in 1922 and 1923 when it voted for union with the GMD:

In the absence of a strong proletarian class, it is natural that there cannot be a strong Communist Party, a party of the masses to meet the demands of the forthcoming revolution. Therefore, the Communist International has decided that the Chinese Communist Party should co-operate with the Guomindang and that the Chinese Communists should join the Guomindang as individuals.

We shall preserve our own organisation after we have joined the Guomindang. Moreover, we shall do our utmost to attract to our party revolutionary elements of true class consciousness from the Guomindang leftists as well as members of labour organisations. The purpose is to gradually expand our organisation and to strictly

Democratic centralism

The notion that in a truly revolutionary party the members owed absolute loyalty and obedience to the leaders.

Red Army

The powerful military force developed by the Bolsheviks which had enabled them to win the Russian civil war (1918–20).

Key question

What were the perceived advantages and disadvantages to the CCP of a merger with the GMD?

Soviet system

A rigidly structured political organisation which excluded all non-Communists.

Key terms

Key term

enforce our party discipline so that the foundation of a strong Communist Party with mass followings will be eventually established.

The small capitalist class we have in China will quickly develop and become strong after the success of the democratic revolution, and it will certainly take a position opposite to that of the proletarian class. Then we proletarians must deal with the capitalist class and proceed with the second stage of our struggle, namely, the establishment of a proletarian dictatorship based on an alliance between workers and poor peasants.

Key question

Why were some Chinese Communists uncertain about an alliance with the GMD?

Key terms

Moneyed bourgeois elements

Industrialists, businessmen and bankers.

Left GMD

The pro-Moscow Marxist sympathisers within the Guomindang.

Key question

What impact did the 30 May Incident have on GMD-CCP relations?

Key dates

The GMD-CCP United Front: 1924

30 May Incident: 1925

Communist doubts

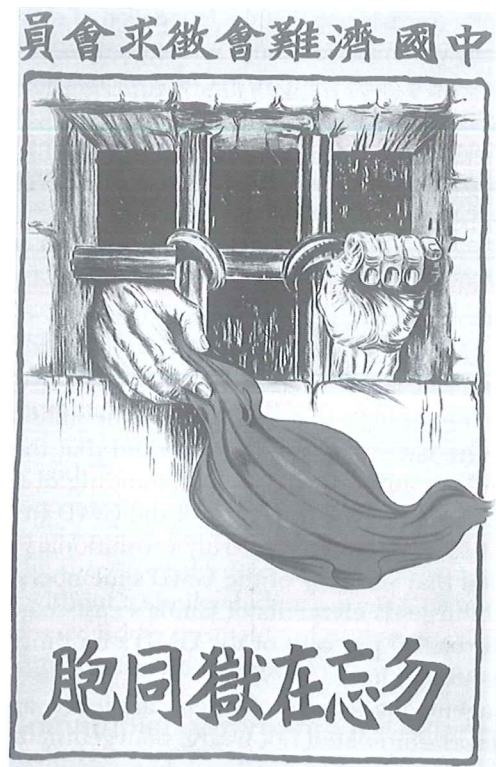
Yet, even at this early stage, there were those in the CCP who were uneasy at the thought of a union along the lines advocated by the Comintern. Chen Duxiu was concerned that the Russian advice derived from an incomplete understanding of the situation in China. He considered that the aims of the GMD were too imprecise for it to be accepted as a truly revolutionary force and he was disturbed that so many of the GMD's members came from the **moneyed bourgeois elements** of China's east-coast cities. One calculation was that 90 per cent of the GMD's funding came from one city alone – Shanghai.

Comintern agents made light of Chen's anxieties, assuring him that the GMD was dominated not by the bourgeoisie but by the **left GMD**. Chen was urged to dwell on what united China's two revolutionary forces, hatred of warlordism and foreign imperialism, rather than on what might divide them. The Comintern repeated its instruction that the CCP join the Nationalists. Overawed by the reputation of the Russian Bolsheviks as the leaders of world revolution, most CCP members swallowed their misgivings and did as they were told. The outcome was the formation in 1924 of the GMD-CCP United Front.

The 30 May Incident 1925

The argument for the existence of the United Front was bolstered by an event in 1925, which may be regarded as marking the climax of what had begun in 1919 with the 4 May Movement (see page 37). In Shanghai, on 30 May 1925, a large crowd marched in protest against an earlier shooting of Chinese workers by Japanese factory guards. Frightened by the scale of the march, the British commander of the international settlement in the city ordered his forces to scatter the protesters with rifle fire, an overreaction that resulted in 12 deaths. The revolutionary parties immediately exploited the outrage among the Chinese to organise further strikes and riots. Attacks were made on foreign legations amid scenes reminiscent of the Boxer Rising (see page 13). For days, Guangzhou and Shanghai became impossible to govern. An uneasy peace was eventually restored but the incident had revealed how intense anti-foreigner sentiments had become.

For Chinese revolutionaries, the 30 May affair added weight to their conviction that China's internal and external enemies could be overcome only by force. This was a truth which all realists



This poster, declaring 'Forget not your brothers in jail!' was issued shortly after the 30 May Incident by the CCP. To whom was the poster intended to appeal?

accepted. The chief beneficiary from this stress on the role of the military was Chiang Kaishek, who shortly before the 30 May Incident had become the leader of the Nationalists. In 1924 he had been appointed commander-in-chief at the Whampoa Military Academy at Guangzhou, the GMD's military headquarters. Chiang then used his leadership of the **National Revolutionary Army (NRA)**, which that position gave him, to overcome his rivals within the GMD in the succession struggle that followed the death of Sun Yatsen in March 1925.

The political effect of Sun Yatsen's death

The death of Sun Yatsen in 1925 was a highly significant moment in Chinese politics. It had the effect of releasing the anti-Communist forces within the GMD which Sun had previously held in check. Chiang Kaishek's success in the GMD power struggle was a victory for the military in the party, the element that had close relations with the Chinese middle class and which was opposed to the social revolutionary policies of the CCP. Chiang had not shared his predecessor's belief that the CCP could be easily absorbed into the GMD and then rendered harmless. Although Chiang, along with nearly all the leading members of the GMD, had received training in Moscow in the early 1920s, he had acquired no love for Marxism. His conviction was that the Communists represented an internal challenge that had to be crushed.

National Revolutionary Army (NRA)
The GMD's military wing.

Key term

Death of Sun Yatsen:
1925

Key date

Key question
In what ways were the relations between China's two main political parties altered by Sun Yatsen's passing?

However, Chiang knew that the Communists were not the only obstacle. Before he and his Nationalists could take full power in China, the warlords, who still controlled large areas of central and northern China, had to be broken. The time was ripe; the 30 May Incident in 1925 had created a mood of national anger that could now be turned against warlordism. Chiang planned to combine his two objectives, the destruction of the warlords and the obliteration of the Communists, into one major campaign. He could not, of course, openly declare his second objective until the first had been achieved. As long as the warlords were undefeated the GMD–CCP United Front had to be preserved; he still needed the CCP as military allies.

Despite the evidence of Chiang's hostility to Communism and the Soviet Union, the Comintern continued to urge the Chinese Communists to work with the GMD in the United Front. The result was the joint planning of a Nationalist–Communist campaign aimed at the annihilation of warlord power. In July 1926, in his southern base in Guangzhou, Chiang Kaishek made a passionate speech calling on all true revolutionaries to join his Nationalists in a national crusade to destroy the warlords. His speech marked the beginning of the 'Northern Expedition'.

The Northern Expedition 1926–8

In campaigning against the warlords, the United Front selected three main targets:

- Wu Peifu, who was master of an area known as the Central Plains, between the Yellow and Yangzi rivers
- Sun Chuanfang, who dominated much of eastern China
- Zhang Zuolin, who controlled northern China between Beijing and Manchuria.

The Front's strategy was to surround the individual warlord armies, cut their **supply lines** and steadily crush them. This often resulted in brutal warfare with heavy casualties. Nevertheless, by the summer of 1927, United Front forces had captured the key cities of Wuhan and Shanghai, effectively ending Wu Peifu's hold over central China.

Sun Chuanfang was more difficult to overcome, since his forces put up a particularly fierce resistance. In 1927 his army of some 100,000 launched a series of counterattacks which badly damaged the Nationalist forces. It was only after Chiang Kaishek had built up an army of 250,000 that he was able, in 1928, to outnumber and overcome Sun Chuanfang's forces.

However, although delayed by Sun's spirited defiance, the Alliance was not to be denied. Once Zhang Zuolin, the warlord of the Beijing area, had been finally driven out in 1928, the GMD was in a position to announce that it was now the legitimate government of China and that it would rule from the new capital of Nanjing.

One consistent advantage to the Nationalists during the Northern Expedition was the hatred that most of the people living under the warlords felt towards their oppressors. This made

Key question
How successful was the Northern Expedition?

Key date
Northern Expedition:
1926–8

Key term
Supply lines
The vital links between an army and its ammunition, equipment and food sources.