

Uncertain Adversaries, 1917–1948

On the eve of the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Mao Zedong, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) chairman, identified the major factors that made it possible for the CCP to take over the national government. One was the Russian Revolution that “delivered Marxism and Leninism to us.” The other was the victory of the Russian Revolution that provided an example. “Take the Russian path, this is the conclusion.”

However, the first Chinese who sought assistance from the Russians was Sun Yatsen, a “petty bourgeois revolutionary” who was initially overlooked by the Russian Communists. Moscow began to offer comprehensive guidance and assistance to the Nationalist (Guomindang) Party led by Sun Yatsen in the autumn of 1923. Within four or five years, it managed to turn the small organization that had been operated by Sun for four decades into the most powerful political force in China, with a “party army” that was able to unify the mainland by force.

In sharp contrast, the CCP, established with Soviet help in 1921, had only several dozen members at the beginning and in its early years was forced to operate underground. The party followed Moscow's instructions and allowed many of its members to join the Nationalist Party. It was able to rapidly grow, while at the same time it helped the Nationalist Party to expand. However, its conflicts with the Nationalist Party were inevitable because there was no true loyalty to the latter. As soon as Sun passed away, Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek), a military man, became the leader of the Nationalist Party. All Communists were expelled from the Nationalist Party and forced to engage in a Russian-style “Soviet Revolution” in the countryside.

In 1928, the Nationalist Party managed to consolidate its rule over China. The Communists, who could only survive and grow in the rural areas far away from the major cities, found it difficult to effectively challenge the ruling status of the Nationalists. However, as Mao Zedong recognized in his later years, the Japanese invasion significantly changed the political order in China. On the one hand, Moscow immediately readjusted its policy toward China as it too faced grave challenges from the Japanese. On the other hand, as the “Soviet

Revolution” had suffered disastrous defeats, Mao Zedong, a leader who was goot at military strategy, extremely pragmatic, and known for his independent thinking, began to rise within the CCP. Thus, the CCP was gradually resurrected after the War of Resistance Against Japan began in 1937. Within eight years, the number of its members and army soldiers grew from about 20,000 to over 1 million, giving it the power to challenge the Nationalist government, which had lost one-half of China to the Japanese invaders.

The impact of Soviet Russia, later the Soviet Union, on the development of Chinese politics and history between the 1920s and the 1940s is obvious. Both the Nationalist and the Communist parties owed much of their success to Soviet Russia. Their setbacks were also closely tied to the Soviet interventions. However, the political ecology within China and its complex relations with the outside world greatly enriched the history of modern China and left countless stories worth pondering by later generations.