

developing the new Red soviet. This further vindicated the CCP's claim that the Long March had been undertaken not as a flight but as the first step in a crusade to lead the Chinese people against the invading enemy. Mao's declared aim was not merely to resist defeat by the Guomindang, but to unite all true Chinese revolutionaries and patriots in a national struggle. He spoke of 'combining civil war with national war' and winning over 'soldiers from the White armies and young students who are caught up in the anti-Japanese tide'. In regard to the GMD, he was careful to distinguish between Chiang Kai-shek 'the head traitor who is helping Japan destroy China' and Chiang's followers, who for the most part were dupes rather than evil people. If they could be shown the error of their ways they would be eager to enlist in the Red cause.¹

The need for resistance was urgent. Late in 1935, the Japanese began to intensify their hold on northern China by moving more troops into the area and demanding that the Chinese accept the formation of a regional autonomous government, composed of pro-Japanese appointees, with authority over six provinces, including Shaanxi. Choosing not to challenge this, Chiang Kai-shek's northern commanders came to an agreement with the Japanese and withdrew from Beijing. This produced a reaction similar to the anti-Japanese demonstrations of 1915 and 1925. In what later became known as the 9 December movement, students took to the streets to protest against this new wave of imperialism. Beijing, Shanghai, and Wuhan witnessed marches, strikes, and violent clashes between protesters and police. Significantly among the banners carried were many declaring 'Stop the Civil War, Unite Against the Enemy': evidence that the protests were as much against China's internal divisions as against the Japanese occupation itself.

The event was a godsend to the CCP. It revealed that Chiang's anti-Communist campaigns and his inept resistance to Japan were alienating all genuine Chinese nationalists. Coinciding with the CCP's establishment of its base at Yanan, the 9 December movement gave point to Mao's own slogan 'Chinese do not fight Chinese'. If the Communists could exploit the mood of the times, they were in a position to undermine Chiang's position by leading the anti-Japanese movement. Mao claimed that 9 December marked a new period in the Chinese revolution; the CCP had begun to supersede the GMD as the true representative of Chinese nationalism. Strength was given to his claim by a remarkable set of events, known subsequently as the Xian Incident.

4

MAO'S PATH TO POWER

THE YANAN YEARS, 1935-43

If our country is subjugated by the enemy we shall lose everything. For a people deprived of its national freedom the revolutionary task is not immediate socialism, but the struggle for independence.

Mao Zedong, July 1936

MAO AND CHIANG KAI-SHEK

The completion of the Long March and the fall of Zhang Guotao left Mao in a strong position. His military strategy had proved correct, he had chosen the route that saw the March through to ultimate success, and in the course of the journey he had overcome the various challenges to his authority and imposed himself on the party. Yet Mao was well aware of what a close-run thing the whole affair had been and how much was owed to chance and to Japan. He was wholly serious in 1972 when he told Kakuei Tanaka, the Japanese prime minister, that, far from being ill-disposed towards Japan, he looked upon her with gratitude since it had been the Japanese presence in China in the 1930s that had diverted and weakened the Guomindang and so saved the Communists from destruction.

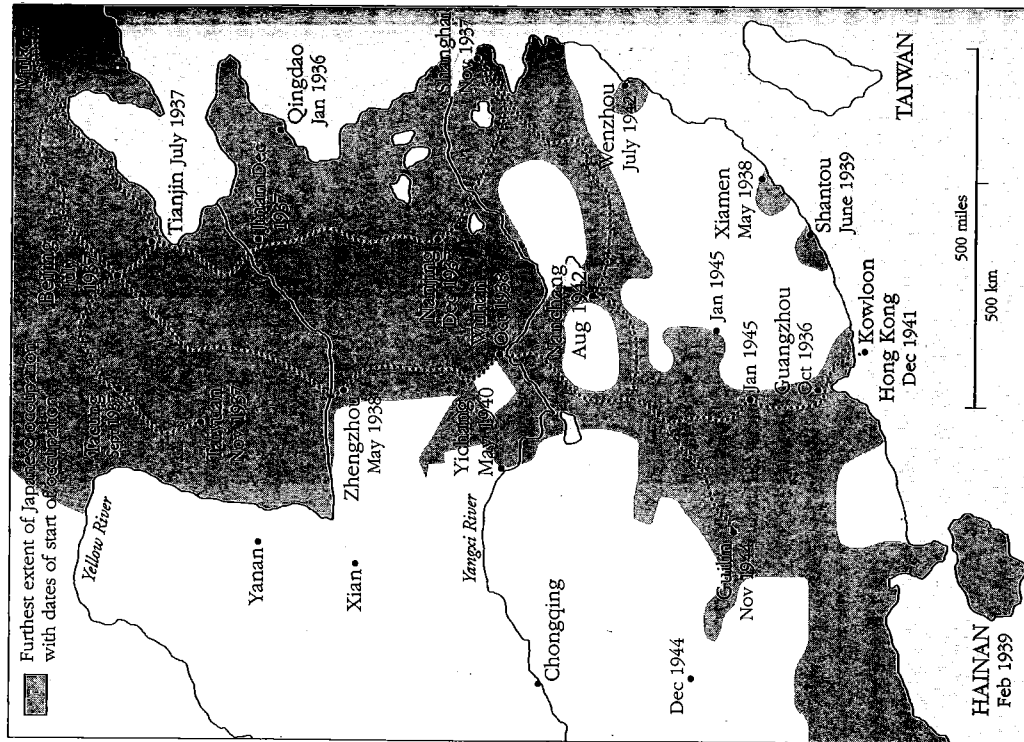
What makes this ironic is that when Mao arrived in Shaanxi he made the struggle against the Japanese the centrepiece of his policy for

THE XIAN INCIDENT, 1936

During the twelve months following the 9 December movement, frustration with Chiang Kai-shek's less than resolute opposition to Japan began to mount. His style of warfare against the invader was summed up in the slogan 'trade space to buy time'. Chiang held that China was so vast that the Japanese would never be able to occupy it completely and would exhaust themselves in the effort to do so. The longer the war lasted the weaker the Japanese would become. This was a realistic but hardly inspiring judgement since it condemned China to a costly war of attrition, which strained the loyalty of Chiang's supporters. Splits began to appear in the Nationalist ranks and mutinies occurred in some of the GMD units.

A significant figure was General Zhang Xueliang, known as the 'Young Marshal'. In 1928 Zhang succeeded his father, Zhang Zuolin, as warlord ruler of Manchuria, following the elder Zhang's assassination by the Japanese. Although for expediency's sake Zhang Xueliang felt obliged to co-operate formally with the Japanese, he continued to act independently by expanding his power base in the northern provinces. He also accepted a post in the Nanjing government and pledged himself to the GMD. When the Japanese occupied Manchuria in 1931, Zhang's instinct was to carry the fight to the invader. However, Chiang Kai-shek ordered him to withdraw his forces rather than risk defeat. Zhang complied but was unhappy. By 1936, his disillusion with the GMD had been deepened by further orders from Chiang telling him to divert his resistance to the Japanese into an attack on the CCP forces in the Shaanxi region. During the same period, Zhang had become impressed by the dedication of the Communists in their war against the invaders. A campaign led by Mao Zedong into Hebei province in the spring of 1936, which Zhang witnessed, convinced him of the effectiveness of the Red army as a fighting force. This, coupled with Mao's willingness to negotiate with him as to how the GMD and the CCP might best combine their forces against the Japanese, strengthened Zhang's doubts about Chiang's anti-Communist strategy. He judged that Mao had a grasp of the seriousness of the Japanese threat to China that Chiang lacked.

Mao, indeed, placed the Japanese occupation in a world context. He told Edgar Snow that 'Japanese aggression is menacing not only China, but also world peace.' He added that if the foreign powers were prepared to assist China in its struggle to avoid being 'completely colonized' then



Map 4 The Sino-Japanese war, 1937-45

'the opportunities for foreign co-operation in China would become very great'. Mao also forecast that if Chiang continued his policy of 'promise and retreat' the Guomindang would rebel against him. 'He must either oppose Japan or be overthrown by his own subordinates.' Chiang's only salvation was to accept his mistakes and heed the wishes of the Chinese people.²

In the remaining six months of 1936, the CCP, represented by Zhou Enlai, made frequent overtures to Chiang, urging him to act along the lines suggested by Mao and work for a common GMD-CCP resistance. But Chiang made no move to change his strategy. In November 1936, Mao complained to Zhang Xueliang that the GMD attacks on the Red bases were not lessening but mounting. A month later Mao wrote directly to Chiang in respectful but urgent terms. Addressing him as 'the honourable Mr Chiang', he appealed to him to recognize the fury that the Chinese people felt towards the Japanese occupiers. Instead of pursuing 'a civil war of mutual slaughter' let Chiang devote his energies to fighting the invaders. Were he to do so, he would become 'a glorious hero . . . respected by all and honoured forever by history'.³

The same plea was made by Zhang Xueliang, who begged Chiang Kai-shek to respond to the national mood by leading a combined resistance to the Japanese. But Chiang not only refused, he decided to force Zhang into line. He flew to Xian in central Shaanxi, where Zhang's army was stationed, with the intention of publicly reprimanding the Young Marshal and obliging him to obey the order to renew the extermination campaign against the Reds. However, Chiang had underestimated both the degree of disaffection among Zhang's troops and their commander's determination. Chiang had flown into a mutiny. The morning after he arrived, still in his pyjamas and minus his dentures, he was seized by a group of Zhang's troops. Zhang then telegraphed Mao and Zhou Enlai to inform them he had Chiang under arrest. The speed with which he contacted the Communist leaders led commentators to suggest that the Communists had helped plan the coup. This remained the GMD claim for decades despite the lack of hard evidence of CCP collusion. In any case, the question that mattered at the time was not whether Mao and his colleagues had plotted with Zhang to seize Chiang but how they would respond to the event.

In one obvious sense, Chiang's arrest provided a huge opportunity for the Communists. They now had at their mercy the man who for a decade had been trying to crush them out of existence, the Guomindang leader

who had put a quarter of a million dollars on Mao Zedong's head. If retribution was their aim, now was the moment. Perhaps this was indeed Mao's first thought. He was quoted as advocating Chiang's execution, provided that Zhang Xueliang did the dirty work: 'the word "kill" must not come from our lips.'⁴ But if that was his initial idea it was soon superseded by the realisation that Chiang Kai-shek was more valuable alive than dead. The humiliation of his arrest by his own troops put Chiang in a very vulnerable position. Now was the time to bend him to the CCP's will and impose a policy upon him. Zhou Enlai was immediately rushed to Xian to parley with Chiang and Zhang Xueliang. Since Zhang was willing to conform to any decision the CCP might come to, this effectively made Chiang the prisoner of Zhou and the Communists.

Moscow's interpretation of the incident was to see it as a piece of Japanese subterfuge. Stalin still held to the view that the GMD under Chiang remained the force best able to tie down the Japanese in China, he believed that was why Japan had been party to the mutiny and arrest.⁵ Stalin, therefore, ordered the CCP to organise Chiang's release. Mao was reported to be outraged by this interference since it showed that the Soviet Union still regarded the CCP as incapable of running its own affairs. Yet it so happened that Stalin's demand was in keeping with the decision which Mao was moving towards. At a series of hurriedly called Politburo meetings chaired by Mao, it was agreed that if Chiang declared himself willing to accept a set of formal demands made by the CCP he should not be kept prisoner, let alone killed. Zhou Enlai negotiated over this with Chiang, Zhang Xueliang, and a number of other GMD leaders, including Chiang's vivacious wife, Soong Meiling.

The outcome was that in late December 1936 Chiang, in return for his freedom, accepted the Communist proposals. These included an end to the GMD's campaigns against the Reds, the recognition of the CCP as a legitimate party, and the re-forming of a GMD-CCP front to carry on China's anti-Japanese struggle. In a remarkable act of atonement for his original mutiny, Zhang agreed to fly back to Nanjing as Chiang's prisoner. His expectation was that, having helped Chiang Kai-shek save face in this way, he would be set free once he was back in the GMD capital. Chiang, however, did not forgive so easily; Zhang was to be held in custody by the Guomindang for the next fifty years.

In claiming credit for the successful resolution of the Xian Incident, Mao told the Politburo that the agreement with Chiang had brought an

end to the civil war and 'marked the beginning of the War of Resistance'. However, even at the point of success it is unlikely that Mao really believed that Chiang would abide by his Xian commitments. It is true that in December 1936 Mao acknowledged that a declaration, published by Chiang after his release, in which he ordered GMD troops to begin withdrawing from the Red areas, was 'proof of his acting in good faith'. But Mao was also at pains to characterise the declaration as 'so ambiguous and evasive as to be a truly interesting masterpiece among China's political documents'. To his sarcasm he added a warning that should Chiang renege on the promises given at Xian he would be destroyed by 'the revolutionary tide of the people'.⁶

Yet if Mao harboured such doubts about Chiang Kai-shek, the question remains as to why he had not taken more drastic action against him when the Reds had him in their power at Xian. The answer lies in the propaganda value that the situation offered. Chiang's recognition of the CCP, albeit enforced, gave the Communists a legitimacy they had hitherto lacked. Moreover, set against a decade of the Guomindang's constant effort to exterminate them, the CCP's willingness not merely to spare Chiang but to recognise him as the leader of the Chinese resistance seemed an act of heroic selflessness. Party interests had been subordinated to national needs. The CCP's perceived restraint certainly gained them a rush of adherents. Yanan became a Mecca for those Chinese eager to be part of a genuine struggle against the occupiers of their country.

The ranks of the idealists were swollen by a mass of refugees who fled to the Red base area in Shaanxi following the events of 7 July 1937. It was on that day that, on the pretext of a Chinese assault on its forces at the Marco Polo Bridge in Beijing, Japan extended its occupation of China into a full scale expansionist war. It was these events rather than the Xian agreement that made a reality of the CCP-GMD united front. The day after Japan's attack, Mao telegraphed Chiang offering to place the Red Army under his direction in order 'to save the nation'. Chiang was forced by the sheer pressure of the Japanese advance to co-operate with the Reds. With the fall of Beijing, Shanghai, and Nanqing in 1937, the GMD capital had to be transferred to Chongqing in Sichuan province. As the Guomindang forces were pushed out of the northern regions during 1937 and 1938, the areas they left were defended in scattered pockets by Red detachments. The Communist guerrillas thus became the main front-line troops resisting the Japanese. They also provided the local government and

administration of these regions. Through force of circumstance the Reds had begun to gain an influence in occupied China that would eventually see them achieve the very end which Chiang was dedicated to preventing – the displacement of the Guomindang by the CCP as the political power in the nation.

A major complication was the attitude of the Soviet Union. Stalin had never fully abandoned his belief that the Guomindang was the best bet for successful revolution in China. It is important to understand his reasoning. His call for a resumption of the GMD-CCP united front was far from being a disinterested one. He had become seriously disturbed by Japanese expansionism. The year 1936 had witnessed the signing of the anti-Comintern Pact, the agreement between Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and imperialist Japan, which opened up the prospect of a co-ordinated two-front attack on the USSR, on both its European and its Far Eastern borders. The primary purpose of Stalin's foreign policy had consistently been the protection of Soviet interests, not the advancement of international socialism. That was why the Comintern had become essentially a vehicle for subordinating the international Communist movement to the will of the Soviet Union. A fearful Stalin was hardly likely to put the interests of the nascent CCP before those of the USSR. His support for a resurrection of the GMD-CCP united front had little to do with the merits of the internal Chinese situation. He was concerned with how best to use China to lessen the Japanese threat to the Soviet Union.

MAO AND WANG MING

Soon after Japan began its full-scale war on China in July 1937, Wang Ming was sent from Moscow to bring the CCP into line. Mao found himself in yet another power struggle. Again, this was not openly acknowledged. When Mao went to meet Wang on his arrival at the airstrip in Yanan in November, the two men exchanged cordial greetings. The same evening a banquet was held in Wang's honour. However, in accordance with Comintern instructions, Wang immediately set about pressing the demand, 'everything for the united front'. He asked that the CCP accept the supremacy of the GMD and the leadership of Chiang Kai-shek. Mao responded by arguing that to do so would be to throw away all the advantages the CCP had gained by the Long March, by their skilful handling of the Xian Incident and by their establishment of the Chinese