

Stalin used the excuse of fighting Japan, at the very last minute, to invade China and create the conditions for Mao to seize power. A hint came right after Yalta, on 18 February, when Russia's governmental mouthpiece, *Izvestia*, wrote of Moscow's 'desire to solve the Far Eastern problem taking due account of the interests of the Chinese Communists'.

Mao was ecstatic, and his good will towards the Russians extended to their sex lives. Within days, he was trying to fix them up. 'Haven't you liked a single pretty woman here?' Mao asked Russian liaison Vladimirov on 26 February. 'Don't be shy . . .' He returned to the theme a week later: 'Well, there are attractive girls, aren't there? And extremely healthy. Don't you think so? Maybe Orlov would like to look around for one? And maybe you, too, have an eye for someone?'

Vladimirov wrote:

towards evening a girl appeared . . . She shyly greeted me, saying she had come to tidy up the house . . .

I took out a stool, and placed it under our only tree, near the wall. She sat down, tense, but smiling. Then she amiably answered my questions, and was all the while waiting cautiously; her legs crossed, small slender legs in woven slippers . . .

She was a smashing girl, indeed!

. . . she told me she was a university student, just enrolled.

How young she was . . .

On 5 April, Moscow told Tokyo it was breaking their Neutrality Pact. One month later Germany surrendered. This came right in the middle of the CCP congress that ratified Mao's supremacy. Mao fired up the delegates with the sense that victory was imminent for the CCP as well. The Soviet army would definitely come to help them, he said, and then, with a

government was not even informed, much less consulted. Moreover, the US put itself at Stalin's mercy by committing to wait for his permission before it told Chiang Kai-shek — and placed itself in the uniquely constrained position of then being responsible for obtaining Chiang's compliance. As a result, the Generalissimo was not given a full account by the US until 15 June, over four months later. This was shabby treatment of an ally, and it stored up trouble.

big smile, he put the side of his hand to his neck like an axe head, and announced: 'If not, you can chop my head off!' Mao delivered the most effusive comments he ever made about Stalin in his entire life. 'Is Stalin the leader of the world revolution? Of course he is.' 'Who is our leader? It is Stalin. Is there a second person? No.' 'Every member of our Chinese Communist Party is Stalin's pupil,' Mao intoned. 'Stalin is the teacher to us all.'

At ten past midnight on 9 August 1945, three days after America dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima, over 1.5 million Soviet and Mongolian troops swept into China along a huge front stretching more than 4,600 km, from the shores of the Pacific to the province of Chahar — far wider than the European front from the Baltic to the Adriatic. In April, Mao had ordered those of his troops who were near the Russian points of entry to be ready to 'fight in coordination with the Soviet Union'. As soon as the Russo-Mongolian army entered China, Mao went to work round the clock dispatching troops to link up with them and seize the territory they rolled over. He moved his office to an auditorium at Date Garden, where he received a stream of military commanders, drafting telegrams on a ping-pong table he used as a desk, pausing only to wolf down food.

Under the Yalta agreements, before entering China, Russia was supposed to sign a treaty with Chiang Kai-shek, but it stormed in anyway without one. A week after the Russians invaded, with their army driving hundreds of kilometres into China, Chiang's foreign minister reluctantly put his signature on a Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Alliance, which formally severed Outer Mongolia from China. Chiang compromised in return for the Russians recognising him as the sole legitimate government of China and promising to hand back all the territory they occupied to him and only to him.

In spite of his promise, Stalin found myriad ways to assist Mao. His first ploy was to refuse to commit to a timetable for withdrawal. He made a verbal promise to withdraw his troops within three months, but refused to incorporate this in the agreement; and it was attached only as a non-binding 'minute'. In fact, Stalin was to stay much longer than three months, and was

to use the period of occupation to thwart Chiang and secretly transfer territory and assets to Mao.*

Japan surrendered on 15 August. The occasion was greeted in China with firecrackers and street parties, tears and roasts, drums and gongs. Most of China had been at war for eight years, and some regions for fourteen years. During that time at least one-third of the population had been occupied by the Japanese. Tens of millions of Chinese had died, untold millions had been crippled, and more than 95 million people – the largest number in history – had been made refugees. People yearned for peace.

What they got instead was an all-engulfing nationwide civil war, which broke out in earnest at once. In this, Stalin was right behind Mao; in fact, the Russians did not stop their drive south when Japan surrendered, but pressed on for several weeks afterwards. The area Russian troops moved into in northern China was larger than the entire territory they occupied in Eastern Europe. Russian paratroopers landed as far west as Baotou, the railroad due north of Mao's base, some 750 km west of the Manchurian border. By the end of August, with Russian help, the CCP had occupied much of Chahar and Jehol provinces, including their capitals, Zhangjiakou and Chengde, both only some 150 km from Peking, to the northwest and northeast respectively. For a while Mao planned to move his capital to Kalgan, and camel trains carrying documents and luggage set off thither from Yenan.

The key prize was Manchuria, which contained China's best deposits of coal, iron and gold, giant forests – and 70 per cent of its heavy industry. Manchuria was bordered on three sides by Soviet-controlled territory – Siberia, Mongolia and North Korea. The border with Siberia alone was over two thousand kilometres long. 'If we have Manchuria,' Mao had told his Party, 'our victory will be guaranteed.'

Neither the Communists nor the Nationalists had armies in

* Stalin also had his own aggressive agenda: a tentative scheme to detach part of the Mongolian region of China adjacent to Outer Mongolia and merge it with the Soviet satellite. Russo-Mongolian occupation forces actually formed an Inner Mongolia provisional government, ready for the merger, but the scheme was then dropped.

the region, which had been occupied by the Japanese, efficiently and ruthlessly, for fourteen years. But Red guerrillas were far closer than Chiang's troops. The Russians immediately opened up Japanese arms depots to these Reds, including the biggest arsenal, in Shenyang, which alone contained about 100,000 guns, thousands of artillery pieces, and large quantities of ammunition, textiles and food, according to a secret CCP circular. Only a few months earlier, the Communist 8th Route Army had had only 154 pieces of heavy artillery.

The bonanza was not just in weapons, but also in soldiers. The troops of the Japanese puppet Manchukuo regime, almost 200,000 strong, had surrendered en masse to the Soviet army, and were now made available by the Russians to be 're-enlisted' by the CCP. So were hundreds of thousands of men newly unemployed as a result of Russian depredations and outright destruction. The Soviet occupation forces carried off whole factories and machinery as 'war booty', and even demolished industrial installations. The equipment removed by the Russians was estimated to be worth US\$8.5bn (US\$2 billion at current replacement cost). Many local people were deprived of their livelihood. The CCP, which had originally dispatched 60,000 troops into Manchuria, saw its force snowball to well over 300,000.

This empowerment of the CCP was carried out by the Russians in maximum secrecy, as it was in stark violation of the treaty Moscow had just signed with Chiang. The Generalissimo's best, combat-hardened troops, who were American-trained and equipped, were stuck in South China and Burma, far away from the areas Russia held. To get them to Manchuria fast, he desperately needed American ships. America wanted him to talk with Mao about peace; so under American pressure, the Generalissimo invited Mao to come to Chongqing for talks. America's China policy had been defined by the late President Roosevelt (who had died on 12 April 1945 and was succeeded by his vice-president, Harry Truman) as to 'knock heads together', and the US ambassador in China had earlier suggested the idea of bringing the Generalissimo and Mao to the White House together if the two Chinese leaders reached a deal.

Mao did not want to go to Chongqing, and twice turned down Chiang's invitation, mainly because he did not trust Chiang not to harm him. This would be Mao's first venture out of his lair since he had started running his own military force in 1927. He told Chiang he was sending Chou En-lai instead. But Chiang insisted the summit must take place with Mao, and in the end Mao had to accept. Stalin had cabled him no less than three times to go. While secretly helping Mao to seize territory, Stalin wanted him to play the negotiations game. If Mao refused to show up, he would look as though he were rejecting peace, and America would be more likely to give its full commitment to Chiang.

Mao resented this pressure from Stalin. It was to be his biggest grievance against Stalin, and one he would keep bringing up for the rest of his life.

Stalin told Mao that his safety would be assured by both Russia and the US. The founder of Chiang's FBI, Chen Li-fu, told us that the Nationalists had no designs on Mao's life 'because the Americans guaranteed his safety'. Mao knew he would also have secret protection from his strategically placed moles, especially the Chongqing garrison chief, Chang Chen. Even so, he insisted on US ambassador Patrick Hurley coming to Yenan and escorting him to Chongqing as insurance against being bumped off in mid-air.

With all these precautions in place, Mao at last flew off to Chongqing in an American plane on 28 August, leaving Liu Shao-chi in charge in Yenan. When the plane landed, Mao stuck close to Hurley, and got into Hurley's car, snubbing the one Chiang had sent for him.

Mao also took out insurance of the kind he knew best, by ordering an offensive against Nationalist forces while he was in Chongqing, which demonstrated that the Reds would escalate the civil war if anything happened to him. He told his top generals, who were about to be flown (by the Americans) to 8th Route Army HQ: Fight without any restraint. The better you fight, the safer I am. When his troops won the battle at a place called Shangdang, Mao beamed: 'Very good! The bigger the battle, the bigger the victory, the more hope I will be able to return.'

Mao flew into one moment of panic in Chongqing, when

Hurley left on 22 September, followed by Chiang on the 26th, and he feared he was being set up for a hit. Chou was dispatched to the Soviet embassy to ask if the Russians would let Mao stay there, but Ambassador Apollon Petrov was non-committal, and got no reply when he wired Moscow for instructions. Mao was furious.

Mao gained a lot by going to Chongqing. He talked to Chiang as an equal, 'as though the convicts were negotiating with the warders', one observer remarked. Foreign embassies invited him not as a rebel, but as a statesman, and he played the part, behaving diplomatically, and laughing off a pointed challenge from Churchill's no-nonsense envoy General Carton de Wiart, who told Mao that he did 'not consider that [the Reds] contributed much towards defeating the Japs', and that Mao's troops only 'had a nuisance value, but no more'. Even when put on the spot in a tough face-to-face encounter with the US commander in China, General Albert Wedemeyer, about the murder and mutilation by the Reds of an American officer called John Birch, Mao showed aplomb. And he kept his cool when Wedemeyer told him, with more than a hint of a threat, that the US was planning to bring atomic bombs into China, as well as up to half a million troops. By appearing conciliatory, Mao scored a propaganda victory.

The peace talks lasted forty-five days, but the whole episode was theatre. Mao went around exclaiming 'Long live Generalissimo Chiang!', and saying he supported Chiang as the leader of China. But this meant nothing. Mao wanted China for himself, and he knew he could only get it through civil war.

Chiang also knew that war was inevitable, but he needed a peace agreement to satisfy the Americans. Although he had no intention of observing it, he endorsed an agreement that was signed on 10 October. And this behaviour brought benefits, at least in the short term. While Mao was in Chongqing, US forces occupied the two main cities in northern China, Tianjin and Peking, and held them for Chiang, and started to ferry his troops to Manchuria.

After the treaty was signed, Chiang invited Mao to stay with him for the night, and next day they had breakfast together before Mao departed for Yenan. The moment Mao's back was turned, the Generalissimo gave vent to his true feelings in his

diary: 'The Communist Party is perfidious, base, and worse than beasts.'

When Mao returned to Yen'an on 11 October he immediately started military operations to keep Chiang's army out of Manchuria. Lin Biao was appointed commander of the Red forces there. Tens of thousands of cadres had already been dispatched, coming under a new Manchuria Bureau whose leaders the Russians flew secretly from Yen'an to Shenyang in mid-September.

Mao ordered troops deployed around Shanhaiguan, at the eastern end of the Great Wall. His forces had occupied this strategic pass from China proper into Manchuria in cooperation with the Soviet army on 29 August. He asked the Russians to take care of the seaports and the airports. With Russian encouragement, CCP units posing as bandits fired on US ships trying to land Chiang's troops, in one case shooting up the launch of the US commander, Admiral Daniel Barbey, and forcing him back out to sea.

The US 7th Fleet finally had to dock at Qinhuangdao, a port just south of Manchuria, and one of Chiang's best armies disembarked. On the night of 15-16 November it stormed the Shanhaiguan pass. Mao had called for a 'decisive battle' and told his troops to hold out at the pass, but Chiang's divisions simply swept through them. Mao's forces disintegrated so overwhelmingly that one Nationalist commander lamented proudly that 'we don't even have enough people to accept all the arms being surrendered'.

The Communist forces had no experience of trench warfare, or of any kind of modern warfare. As guerrillas, their first principle, as laid down by Mao himself, was 'retreat when the enemy advances'. And that is what they did now. Chiang's armies, on the other hand, had fought large-scale engagements with the Japanese: in Burma, they had put more Japanese out of action in one campaign than the entire Communist army had in eight years in the whole of China. The Nationalist supreme in Manchuria, General Tu Yu-ming, had been in command of major battles against the Japanese, whereas Mao's commander, Lin Biao, had taken part in one single ambush in September 1937, eight

years before, since when he had hardly smelt gunpowder. By studiously avoiding combat with the Japanese, Mao had ended up with an army that could not fight a modern war.

The Reds had been in some frontal engagements during the Japan war, but mostly against weak Nationalist units. They had not faced the cream of Chiang's forces, who, as one top Red commander wrote to Mao, were fresh, well-trained, 'US-style troops', and battle-ready.

The CCP troops were not only badly trained, but also poorly motivated. After the Japanese war, many just wanted peace. The Reds had been using a propaganda song called 'Defeat Japan so we can go home'. After Japan's surrender, the song was quietly banned, but the sentiment - let's go home - could not be quenched as easily as the song.

When Red troops were marched to Manchuria, mainly from Shandong, pep talks focused not on high ideals but on material enticements. Commissar Chen Yi told officers: 'When I left Yen'an, Chairman Mao asked me to tell you that you are going to a good place, a place of great fun. There are electric lights and high-rises, and gold and silver in plenty . . . Others told their subordinates: 'In Manchuria we'll be eating rice and white flour [desirable food] all the time', and 'everyone will be given a promotion'. Even so some officers found it impossible to motivate the soldiers, and kept the destination secret until the troops were safely on board ship en route to Manchuria.

Communist officers who trekked to Manchuria remembered abysmal morale. One officer recalled:

The thing that gave us the worst headache was desertions . . . Generally speaking, all of us Party members, squad commanders, combat team leaders had our own 'wobbles' to watch. We would do everything - sentry duty, chores, and errands - together . . . When the wobbles wanted to take a leak, we would say 'I want to have a piss, too' . . . Signs of depression, homesickness, complaints - all had to be dealt with instantly . . . After fighting, particularly defeats, we kept our eyes peeled.

Most of those who ran away did so after camp was pitched, so . . . as well as normal sentries, we placed secret sentries . . . Some of us tied ourselves surreptitiously to

our wobbles at night . . . Some of us were so desperate we adopted the method the Japanese used with their labourers — collected the men's trousers and stowed them in the company HQ at night.

Yet even some of these trusted cadres deserted.

The commander of one division that had transferred from Shandong to Manchuria reported to Mao on 15 November that between 'deserters, stragglers and the sick' he had lost 3,000 men out of the 32,500 he had set off with. Earlier, the commander of another unit reported: 'Last night alone . . . over 80 escaped.' One unit suffered a desertion rate of over 50 per cent, ending up with fewer than 2,000 out of its original 4,000-plus men. Local Manchurian recruits also defected in droves when they realised they would be fighting the national government. During a ten-day period in late December 1945 to early January 1946, over 40,000 went over to the Nationalists, according to the Reds' own statistics. Although CCP troops in Manchuria far outnumbered the Nationalists, and were well armed with Japanese weapons, they were still unable to hold their own.

Mao's No. 2, Liu Shao-chi, had foreseen that the Reds would not be able to shut Chiang out of Manchuria. He had a different strategy. From Mao, while Mao was in Chongqing, Liu had instructed the CCP in Manchuria to focus on building a solid base on the borders with Russia and its satellites, where the troops could receive proper training in modern warfare. On 2 October 1945, he had sent an order: 'Do not deploy the main forces at the gate to Manchuria to try to keep Chiang out, but at the borders with the USSR, Mongolia and Korea, and dig our heels in.' In addition, Liu had told the Reds to be ready to abandon big cities and go and build bases in the countryside surrounding the cities.

But when Mao returned to Yenan from Chongqing, he over-ruled Liu. Concentrate the main forces at the pass into Manchuria and at big railway junctions, he ordered on 19 October. Mao could not wait to 'possess the whole of Manchuria', as another order put it. But his army was not up to the job.

Mao's relationship with his army was in many ways a remote one. He never tried to inspire his troops in person, never visited the front, nor went to meet the troops in the rear. He did not care about them. Many of the soldiers sent to Manchuria had malaria. In order to drag these feverish men the many hundreds of kilometres, each sick man was sandwiched between two able-bodied soldiers and pulled along by a rope round the waist. Mao's preferred method for dealing with wounded soldiers was to leave them with local peasants, who were usually living on a knife-edge between subsistence and starvation, and had no access to medicine.*

His army's performance showed that Mao had no prospect of victory any time soon, and Stalin adjusted rapidly. On 17 November 1945, after Chiang's army stormed into southern Manchuria, Chang noted a 'sudden change of attitude' in the Russians. They told the CCP it would have to vacate the cities, putting an end to Mao's hopes of becoming immediate master of all Manchuria, and of a quick victory nationwide.

Stalin knew this decision would be devastating for Mao, so he made a gesture to reassure him. On the 18th, a cable was dispatched from Russia: 'MAO AN YIN[G] asks for your permission to go to "41" [code name for Yenan]. Stalin was finally returning Mao's son. This was good news for Mao, but no help in seizing Manchuria. Desperate entreaties to the Russians followed, and futile orders for his troops to hold out. When both failed, Mao collapsed with a nervous breakdown. On the 22nd he moved out of Dare Garden into a special elite clinic (after all the patients had first been turfed out). For days on end, he was unable to rise from his bed, or to sleep a wink. He lay trembling all over, his hands and feet convulsing, pouring cold sweat.

At his wits' end, Mao's assistant Shi Zhe suggested asking Stalin for help. Mao agreed, and Shi cabled Stalin, who replied at once, offering to send doctors. Mao accepted the offer, but two hours later he seems to have had second thoughts about

* When two years later he urged sending large forces deep into Nationalist areas, the commanders asked what would happen to the wounded without a base area to fall back on. Mao's airy response was: 'It's easy . . . leave the wounded and the sick to the masses.'

laying himself so bare to Stalin's eyes and asked Shi to hold the telegram. But it had already gone off.

Only days before, Stalin had recalled Mao's GRU doctor Orlov, together with the whole GRU mission in Yenan. Orlov had been in Yenan for three and a half years without a break, but the minute he arrived in Moscow, Stalin ordered him back to Mao. The hapless Orlov arrived back on 7 January 1946, accompanied by a second doctor called Melnikov from the KGB. They found nothing seriously wrong with Mao, except for mental exhaustion and nervous stress. Mao was advised to delegate work more, relax, take walks and get plenty of fresh air. Orlov, however, was soon pleading nervous tension himself and begging Moscow to recall him. In vain.

On the plane with the doctors came Mao's son, An-ying, to whom Stalin had personally presented an inscribed pistol before he left. It was over eighteen years since Mao had seen his son, then four years old, in 1927, when Mao had left his wife Kai-hui and three sons and begun his outlaw career. Now An-ying was a good-looking young man of twenty-three. At the airfield Mao hugged him, exclaiming: 'How tall you have grown!' That evening, Mao wrote a thank-you letter to Stalin.

Mao had moved out of the clinic by now and settled in the HQ of the military, a beautiful place known as Peony Pavilion. It was surrounded by a large garden of peonies, including some of China's most gorgeous varieties. To this rich splendour the plant-loving nominal C-in-C, Zhu De, and his staff had added a delicate peach orchard, a fish pond and a basketball court. Mao spent a lot of time with An-ying, often sitting at a square stone table chatting outside his adobe house, which stood right next to his deep – and private – air-raid shelter. A frequent mah-jong and card partner of the Maos at the time noticed that Mao acted very affectionately towards his son. Mao's health gradually improved. By spring, he had made a good recovery.

The most comforting thing for Mao was that most of Manchuria was still in Communist hands. Stalin maintained overall control of the area, having hung on way beyond the three months he had promised, and had refused to allow anything but a skeleton Nationalist staff into the cities. Though the CCP had

to move its organisations out of most cities, they entrenched in the vast countryside.

The Russian army did not finally leave Manchuria until 3 May 1946, nearly ten months after it had entered. To maximise the CCP's chances, they kept the Nationalists in the dark until the very last minute about the pull-out schedule, while coordinating their departure with the CCP so that it could take over the area's assets, including major cities, which the Reds now re-entered. Mao ordered his army again to hold out in key cities on the railway line, which he insisted were to be defended 'regardless of the sacrifice', 'like Madrid', evoking the heroic image of defending the capital to the death in the Spanish civil war.

Mao's second in command, Liu Shao-chi, again cautioned that the Reds were not up to stopping Chiang's army, and that most cities would have to be abandoned. The Manchuria commander, Lin Biao, also warned Mao that 'there is no great likelihood of holding on to [the cities], and suggested their strategy should be 'to eliminate enemy forces, not defend cities'. He agreed with Liu Shao-chi that the priority was to build up rural bases. Mao insisted that the cities must be defended 'to the death'. *

But the next round of battles showed that his army was still no match for Chiang's. Within weeks of the Russian withdrawal the Nationalists had seized every major city in Manchuria except Harbin, the nearest to Russia, and the Communist forces had been reduced to a state of collapse. They retreated north in chaos, under aerial bombardment, harried by Nationalist tanks and motorised troops. Lin Biao's political commissar later admitted that 'the whole army had disintegrated' and fallen into what he called 'utter anarchy'. One officer recalled being chased northward non-stop for forty-two days: 'It really looked as though we'd had it . . .'

* Since then, a cultivated myth has credited Mao with the strategies of surrounding the cities from the countryside' and of 'aiming mainly to eliminate enemy forces, not to defend or capture cities'. In fact, the former idea came from Liu Shao-chi, and was vigorously opposed by Mao before practicality forced him to adopt it; and the latter was Lin Biao's.