

CONQUEST AND EXTERMINATION, 1928-34

The unification of China, 1928

In April 1928 the leaders of the Guomindang put Chiang Kaishek in command of a second Northern Campaign. His orders were to go much further north and capture Beijing, the capital, and thus bring northern China under Guomindang control.

To strengthen his army Chiang Kaishek made an alliance with two powerful warlords in the north – Feng Yuxiang whose army numbered 300,000 men, and Yan Xishan. With their help, Chiang was able to fight a war against the most powerful warlord of all – Zhang Zuolin, the ruler of Manchuria, who had parts of northern China, including Beijing, under his control.

After a short campaign, Chiang Kaishek's forces entered Beijing. Their task was made easier when a bomb exploded on the train taking Zhang Zuolin out of the city, killing him. Zhang's successor as warlord of Manchuria, his son Zhang Xueliang, surrendered to Chiang Kaishek and recognised the Guomindang as the true government of united China.

The Guomindang was now the most powerful single force in China. It transferred the capital from Beijing to its base in Nanjing, in the richest part of the country. There it set itself up as the **National Government** and gave the power to rule to a Council of State. The Chairman of this Council was Chiang Kaishek, making him, in effect, the ruler of China.

Disunity

In reality, Chiang Kaishek had not by any means united China under his rule. He had only managed to conquer the north with the help of the local warlords, Feng Yuxiang and Yan Xishan, and they had never fully accepted his authority. In 1929 Feng and Yan rebelled against Chiang. For the next two years, northern China suffered a violent and bloody civil war as Chiang fought Feng and Yan to regain control. Even when Yan Xishan was defeated he was able to retreat to Shanxi province and set up his own government there.

Even in provinces that were theoretically under his rule, Chiang Kaishek did not always have real control. A major problem was the existence of large gangs of bandits which terrorised whole districts and existed by looting, kidnapping and theft. An official Chinese report made in 1929, about bandit gangs in the Mienchih district, gives us an idea of the scale of the problem:

A. 'When they capture a person for ransom they first pierce his legs with iron wire, and bind them together as fish are hung on a string. When they returned to their bandit dens, the captives were interrogated and were pricked with sickles to make them tell of hidden property they possessed. If there was the slightest hesitation in answering, they were immediately cut in two at the waist – as a warning to others. Then they compelled the villagers to disclose where was hidden the little store of grain with which they were trying to eke out [*make*] an existence. This they carried off, leaving the victims to starve. If any of the adults tried to escape the whole family was slaughtered . . .

In many cases in Mienchih there will be found only eight or ten houses left standing in towns which a year ago had 400 or 450 houses. What has become of the families which once lived in the demolished homes, no man can tell.'

The Jiangxi Soviet

Another area of China which Chiang Kaishek did not control was the province of Jiangxi.

As you have read, the alliance between the Communists and the Guomindang broke down in 1927, and the Communists were thrown out of the big cities with great bloodshed. The survivors of these massacres retreated into the countryside, most of them to Jiangxi province where they set up a 'Chinese Soviet Republic', generally known as the **Jiangxi Soviet**, to govern the province. Mao Zedong was their political leader while Zhu De led the armed forces of the Soviet.

Within a few years of arriving in Jiangxi the Communists had gained the support of many of the peasants living under their rule. This was largely because a Land Law which the Communists passed in 1930 divided up all the cultivated land among the farming population. Millions of peasants who had never before owned land now found they were their own masters. As well as redistributing the land, the Communists reduced the taxes on land, set up schools, abolished outmoded practices such as arranged marriages, and created Peasant Councils to allow communities a say in the running of their affairs.

The Communist **Red Army** also played an important part in winning the support of the peas-

ants. The Red Army's rules of discipline help to explain how it did this:

- B. '1 Replace all doors when you leave a house [*doors in peasant homes were on hooks, not hinges*];
2 Return and roll up the straw matting on which you sleep;
3 Be courteous and polite to the people and help them when you can;
4 Return all borrowed articles;
5 Replace all damaged articles;
6 Be honest in all transactions with the peasants;
7 Pay for all articles purchased;
8 Be sanitary and, especially, establish latrines a safe distance from people's houses.'

The extermination campaigns, 1930-4

Chiang Kaishek regarded the Jiangxi Soviet as a greater threat to his authority than either the warlords or bandits. He therefore organised a series of 'extermination campaigns' against the Communists in an attempt to wipe them out.

Between 1930 and 1934 Chiang Kaishek mounted five extermination campaigns, each one bigger than the last. But although his armies always outnumbered the Communists, the first four campaigns were total failures. This was because Mao Zedong and Zhu De used clever tactics to fight them: instead of fighting them head-on in pitched battles, they lured the Guomindang armies deep into Communist-held territory and then attacked each unit separately, knocking them out in deadly ambushes. Mao summed up these tactics in four slogans:



Guomindang troops setting out on an extermination campaign against the Communists in 1930

- C. '1 When the enemy advances, we retreat!
2 When the enemy halts and encamps, we trouble them!
3 When the enemy seeks to avoid a battle, we attack!
4 When the enemy retreats, we pursue!'

There was, however, a major drawback to Mao's tactics. Whenever he lured Guomindang units into Communist-held areas, they were able to capture Communist villages as they advanced. In the four years of the extermination campaigns, more than a million peasants were killed or starved to death as a result. Understandably, many members of the Communist Party criticised Mao's tactics, saying that not only were they politically wrong; they were also cowardly.

Work section

- A. Test your understanding of this chapter by explaining what the following terms mean: the Jiangxi Soviet; the Red Army; extermination campaigns.
- B. Study source A, then answer these questions:
1. Why do you think the bandits treated their captives with such cruelty?
2. Suggest what might have caused the destruction of so many homes in the district.
3. How does the report show that Chiang Kaishek had no authority in the area?
- C. Study source B, then answer these questions:
1. What light do these rules of discipline throw on the behaviour of other Chinese armies? Explain your answer in detail.
2. What do you think were the aims of these rules of discipline?
- D. Study the photograph above, then answer these questions:
1. In what ways do the Guomindang soldiers look well-equipped for fighting the Communists? How might their equipment cause them difficulties?
2. Compare the photograph with the poster on page 9. How does the Guomindang military strength shown in the photograph differ from the impression created by the poster?
- E. Judging by what you have read in this chapter, why do you think that Chiang Kaishek saw the Communists in Jiangxi as a greater threat than either the warlords or bandits?