

# 1927

*After the death of Sun Yat-sen in March 1925, the Nationalist Party (Guomindang, or GMD) was marred by increasing tensions between a 'left' and a 'right' wing. The Nationalist leadership was also concerned that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was taking advantage of the collaboration with it to grow its own following, on top of a mounting uneasiness among GMD rank and file about the violence unleashed by the land reform policies in rural areas under CCP control. In spite of these tensions, in July 1926, the GMD, supported by its junior partner, launched the Northern Expedition, a military campaign aimed at defeating the warlords who controlled large swathes of the country. Boosted by a remarkable mobilisation of both urban and rural masses, the endeavour was so successful that, by late November, the GMD had already set up a national government in Wuhan dominated by its left wing. Knowing that Shanghai was the next target and with the local working class suffering from a rapid rise in prices, the first months of 1927 saw a spectacular resurgence of unions in the coastal city. The Communist-led Shanghai General Labour Union (上海总工会) (GLU), which had been shut down in 1925 but continued to exist informally, experienced a surge in membership and, taking advantage of the favourable political conjuncture, launched two insurrections in the city, on 22–23 February and 21–22 March. With the Nationalist army getting close, on 21 March, the GLU launched a third armed uprising to rid the city of the warlord forces that controlled it. Although victory was swift and the GLU immediately set up a provisional municipal government that declared support for the Nationalist government in Wuhan, tensions within the GMD and between the GMD and the CCP quickly came to a head. A massacre ensued, and with it the First United Front collapsed.*

# The Third Armed Uprising and the Shanghai Massacre

S.A. SMITH

On 22 March 1927, workers in Shanghai—China’s industrial and commercial heartland and the material and symbolic centre of foreign power—briefly took power through a triple strike (三罢), with merchants and students, in an uprising that defeated the warlord forces that controlled the city. The success of what became known as the ‘third armed uprising’ (第三次武装起义) marks a heroic chapter in the history of the Chinese working class—unparalleled in ambition before or since. The role of workers, however, cannot be divorced from a complex set of relationships that involved the Executive Committee of the Communist International (Comintern) (ECCI) in Moscow; the Central Executive Committee (CEC) of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP); the Shanghai regional organisation of the CCP; rival power centres within the Nationalist Party (Guomindang, or GMD); the British and French authorities who controlled large swathes of the city; uneasy interactions between workers, students, capitalists, and shopkeepers; and, finally, between Communist-dominated labour unions and the secret societies whose influence within the world of labour capitalised on ties of clientelism and native place that cut through class-based solidarity.<sup>1</sup> Fundamentally, however, the history of the uprising and its brutal suppression by Chiang Kai-shek, commander-in-chief of the National Revolutionary Army (NRA), is inexplicable except in the context of fast-changing shifts in military and political power.

## Shanghai in Turmoil

The third armed uprising took place against the backdrop of the Northern Expedition by the NRA that aimed to reunify China by defeating regional warlords and the Beiyang government, which was controlled by rival northern warlords; it also hoped to roll back the influence of the foreign powers. Beginning in Guangdong in July 1926, this military expedition swept north and, by December 1926, had allowed the formation

of a GMD government in Wuhan led by the left wing of the Party. The defeat or cooption of warlords allowed Communists and left GMD members to mobilise peasants, workers, and women around a program of socioeconomic reforms. This mobilisation increased the influence of Communists within the GMD and, together with the dominance exercised by Mikhail Borodin, Soviet adviser to the GMD, heightened opposition to the United Front within the GMD. Chiang Kai-shek refused to recognise the GMD government in Wuhan, and a real possibility of a split in the Party loomed—something the ECCI hoped to avoid.

As the NRA edged towards Shanghai, the Communists began to prepare an uprising aimed at defeating the forces of Sun Chuanfang, the warlord who controlled the Chinese areas of the city. The hope was to do this prior to the arrival of the NRA to strengthen the left within the GMD and NRA and ensure that an incoming Nationalist administration in the city would carry out a far-reaching program of democratic and socioeconomic reforms. This was the aim of both the first armed uprising in November 1926, which hardly merits that name, and the second armed uprising, from 19 to 22 February 1927, which massively increased the influence of organised labour and the popularity of the GMD and the CCP in the city. In line with the United Front policy imposed by the ECCI, the CCP sought to involve the left wing of the GMD in the uprisings. However, Niu Yongjian, the GMD veteran sent to liaise with the CCP, showed more interest in persuading Sun Chuanfang to come over to the NRA than in the niceties of insurrection.

In the wake of the May Thirtieth Movement in 1925 (see Leong's essay in the present volume), the Shanghai General Labour Union (上海总工会) (GLU) had been shut down. However, the prospect of the arrival of Chiang Kai-shek—seen by many workers as the embodiment of the national revolution—together with vigorous efforts by leftist activists, engendered a surge of labour militancy during the second uprising. During the four-day strike, 420,970 industrial and commercial employees in nearly 6,000 enterprises (including many small businesses) halted work—a larger number than in the May Thirtieth Movement.<sup>2</sup> Many of the strikers worked in Chinese-owned enterprises, which meant that financial support for the strike from Chinese capitalists was much lower than in 1925.<sup>3</sup> The GLU failed to achieve legal status but did manage to create the embryo of an ill-disciplined and scantily armed workers' militia, somewhat distinct from the pickets that maintained order during strikes and demonstrations.

## Planning the Third Armed Uprising

In the light of the surge in labour organisation and the rapid rise in CCP and GMD membership, the CEC determined that it must launch a third armed uprising. The NRA was in Jiaxing, about 100 kilometres south of Shanghai, but the expectation was that it would soon resume its advance. Moreover, during the first days of March, Sun Chuanfang's garrison was replaced with northern warlord troops who were heartily detested by the citizens of Shanghai, not least by local business owners who knew that the Shandong warlord who controlled them, Zhang Zongchang, had flooded the areas he controlled with unsecured currency. This created some potential for a renewed alliance between workers, students, and merchants, focused on the ideal of an autonomous government for Shanghai.

On 23 February, the CEC formed a special committee to accelerate the uprising, chaired by CCP general secretary Chen Duxiu, who attended thirty of its thirty-one sessions.<sup>4</sup> Attention was given to building an effective workers' militia. Zhou Enlai, who had arrived in Shanghai in late December, led a new military commission and Soviet military adviser A.P. Appen oversaw the training of the militia. According to Zhou, by the second week of March, there were 1,200 volunteers in what he called the 'workers' shock brigade' (工人突击队), although he reported that they had a mere 250 pistols and 200 hand grenades, and only half had undergone any weapons training.<sup>5</sup> The special committee also stressed the need to explain the aims of the insurrection, resulting in the creation of 154 propaganda teams made up of 1,270 students and 205 teams directly answerable to the Greater Shanghai Bureau of the GMD.<sup>6</sup>

Lines of authority within the CCP were blurred. The CEC, which had its headquarters in the French Concession, had been ordered to move to Wuhan but key members, including Chen Duxiu, preferred to stay in Shanghai. The ECCI was represented in Shanghai by the Far Eastern Bureau, most of whose members were young, inexperienced, and had little knowledge of China. Like the CEC itself, as events unfolded rapidly, these agents of Moscow became disoriented, united only by mistrust of their boss, Grigorii Voitinskii, who was the chair of the bureau. Voitinskii himself was a critic of Borodin, whom he accused of imposing too centralist and authoritarian a structure on the GMD. Things were further complicated by tensions between the CEC and the Shanghai regional Party and between the latter and the GLU.

As far as the United Front was concerned, relations between the CCP and the GMD in Shanghai were worsening. The left wing of the GMD was rather strong in the Greater Shanghai Bureau and Jiangsu Provincial Bureau, but a new power centre emerged on 27 February in the form of the Shanghai branch of the GMD Political Council, which was dominated by right-wing opponents of the United Front. The Communists were under orders from Moscow to avoid a split within the GMD and thus refrained from any public criticism of Chiang Kai-shek. A key issue that galvanised conflict between the two parties was the nature of the government to be formed in Shanghai following the overthrow of the northern warlords. The CCP wished to see a citizens' assembly to which an elected municipal government would be accountable. The Shanghai regional committee argued that such a government should be as much like a soviet as possible, though not all Communists agreed. Niu Yongjian, the GMD veteran sent to liaise with the CCP, dismissed as 'almost comic' the proposal to give workers a plurality of votes in the citizens' assembly and to make the municipal government accountable to it. Instead, the GMD insisted that a new municipal government accept its 'leadership and supervision.'<sup>7</sup>

### The Uprising

On 18 March, the forces of NRA general Bai Chongxi arrived in Songjiang, about thirty kilometres south of Shanghai. Thereupon the CEC special committee resolved that the work stoppage–insurrection begin on Monday, 21 March. On 16 March, the GLU resurrected the demands raised during the second uprising. These included calls to develop the anti-imperialist movement, destroy the warlords, support the Wuhan government and implement a popular democratic government in Shanghai, protect civil rights and the right to strike, institute workers' armed defence, implement safety legislation, and improve wages and working conditions.<sup>8</sup> On the evening of Sunday, 20 March, the GLU held an emergency meeting, attended by 300 delegates, half of whom were said to be Communists.<sup>9</sup> It approved the plan of action of the special committee and agreed to strike on the following day.<sup>10</sup>

The triple stoppage began promptly at midday on Monday, 21 March. Within hours, Shanghai was at a standstill. The labour unions sent teams to all parts of the city to announce the impending arrival of the NRA—

something Shanghai newspapers were prohibited from reporting. GMD flags and slogans appeared everywhere. Shops closed. Students in some twenty colleges walked out of classes, and student speaker teams busily urged traders and workers to support the stoppage.<sup>11</sup> The GLU reckoned that 200,000 workers walked out.<sup>12</sup> The British authorities in the International Settlement responded by declaring a state of emergency, and troops disembarked from the thirty to forty foreign warships that were anchored in the river. *Shenbao* claimed that 800,000 people stopped work, closed their businesses, or left school to demonstrate their support for the NRA.<sup>13</sup> A later source calculated that around 300,000 workers went on strike, and around 4,000 enterprises shut.<sup>14</sup> Following the defeat of the northern warlords, the GLU on 23 March called for a return to work, but insisted that the militias should not disband.

At 1pm on 21 March, the workers' militias took up their agreed positions. Many acted under the authority of their trade unions rather than under the CCP military commission. Hongkou was the first district to fall to the rebels, since there were no northern troops there. In Yangshupu, the militia—poorly organised and heavily reliant on the secret societies—also met minimal resistance, with the 1,500 US marines stationed in the district refusing to intervene.<sup>15</sup> The battle in Nanshi threatened to be fierce since the district was home to the Jiangnan arsenal and shipyard, the headquarters of the Wusong-Shanghai constabulary, and about one-third of the city's 2,000-strong police force. The principal militia at the *Compagnie Française de Tramways et d'Éclairage Électrique de Shanghai* (French Company of Tramways and Electricity) had 139 members but only five pistols and 40 axes. As soon as the arsenal was liberated, weapons became plentiful and both police and warlord forces gave up without much of a struggle. By far the fiercest challenge came in Zhabei, where the bulk of Zhang Zongchang's troops—numbering around 3,000—were concentrated. These were well-armed men, with machine guns, heavy artillery, and armoured cars, concentrated around the North Station. The insurgents comprised mainly printers, postal workers, electricians, and railway workers.

Everywhere workers bore the brunt of the fighting but students from Fudan, Shanghai, and Jinan universities also took part, as did members of the merchant militia.<sup>16</sup> Noteworthy—since it was pregnant with significance for the immediate future—was the part played by members of the Green Gang and Red Gang, who pledged allegiance to Bai Chongxi and the GMD right wing. Among them, the most significant was a unit led

by Xu Langxi, master of the Yuyun Mountain Lodge in the Red Gang and bearer of the highest (大) generational status in the Green Gang, who had been active in the 1911 revolution.<sup>17</sup> Three times in the course of battle the insurgents sent emissaries to Bai Chongxi to beg him to proceed at once to the city.<sup>18</sup> Each time Bai prevaricated. After the third delegation arrived, however, Xue Yue, the Cantonese commander of the first division of the 26th corps, refused any longer to stand by and, at 3pm, Bai finally gave orders for the NRA troops to enter the city.<sup>19</sup> Xue's division arrived in Zhabei in the late afternoon, having come up the railway loop via Jessfield Station, which was occupied by British soldiers. Around 5pm they and some 800 members of the militia, many still without arms, finally captured the North Station. At least 200 insurgents were killed and 1,000 wounded in the course of liberating the city, not counting casualties among the northern forces.<sup>20</sup>

On the morning of 22 March, an exultant citizens' assembly hailed the victory of the NRA and endorsed a list of nineteen members, drawn up by the GMD, who would form the provisional municipal government. In the afternoon half a million people poured into the Public Recreation Ground in Nanshi to welcome the 20,000 NRA troops who were passing through the city. On 26 March, another big meeting was held to welcome the arrival of Chiang Kai-shek himself. Although the municipal government was inaugurated on 29 March, political pressure from the GMD right meant that business and professional representatives refused to take up their seats in view of the large number of Communists and GMD leftists in its ranks. However, on 27 March, the GLU was legalised and announced that the number of unions affiliated with it had risen from 187 at the beginning of 1927 to 502, and that affiliated membership had risen from 76,245 to 821,280 in the same period.<sup>21</sup> The critical issue, however, over which the left and right clashed bitterly was whether the workers' militias should continue to exist. Bai Chongxi was determined to suppress this unruly force, and there was outrage in GMD ranks when news percolated through that the CCP and GLU were toying with the idea of taking the strike-insurrection into the foreign settlements.

### The Massacre

The first person Chiang Kai-shek met on arrival in Shanghai was Huang Jinrong, chief of the French Concession detectives and one of three leaders of the Green Gang. They agreed that the Green Gang should raise a force

from secret-society members, which took the name of the Common Progress Society (公进会), to liquidate the workers' militias. The CCP had always tried to cultivate good relations with the Green Gang, since it carried such clout at all levels of Shanghai society. No less a person than Wang Shouhua, president of the GLU, was a disciple of Du Yuesheng, the principal leader of the Green Gang. However, the CCP and GLU leaders were under no illusions about the threat posed by the machinations of Chiang and Du. The arrival in Shanghai on 1 April of Wang Jingwei, leader of the GMD left wing, muddied the political waters since Wang prevailed on Chen Duxiu to publish a declaration affirming the inviolability of the United Front. More revealing of sentiment within the CCP, however, was the decision by Luo Yinong, secretary of the Shanghai regional committee, to ignore an order from the ECCI to hide all weapons. It seems to be this insubordination that led to his removal on 10 April by the CEC in Wuhan.

On the night of Monday, 11 April, Wang Shouhua was invited to dine with Du Yuesheng, whereupon he was leapt on, trussed in a sack, and buried alive. It was the first act of the drama that would unfold during the night. With the cooperation of the police in the foreign settlements, 500 members of the Common Progress Society, wearing white armbands bearing the character for 'labour', passed into the Chinese areas and began to pick fights with the militias. This served as the pretext for soldiers of Bai Chongxi to intervene to 'suppress internal strife among the workers'. After desperate fighting, by the morning of 12 April, the militias had been crushed.

Mass protests erupted in the course of the day, and the GLU issued an order for a general strike. The following day as many as 240,000 workers walked out.<sup>22</sup> At 1pm a parade set off from Zhabei, led by a military band and union banners. As the protestors filed in the pouring rain along Baoshan Road, machine gunners opened fire and attackers swarmed out of the alleyways, stabbing, shooting, and clubbing the panic-stricken crowd. More than 100 people were killed, 200 wounded, and around fifty simply disappeared. Amazingly, the strike stayed solid the next day even though the decision of the GLU to condemn Chiang Kai-shek publicly as a 'new warlord' who was in cahoots with foreign imperialism apparently disconcerted many workers. Wholesale arrests of Communists were now under way. On 15 April the GLU estimated that more than 300 trade-union activists had been killed, more than 500 arrested, and more than 5,000 were missing or had fled the city.<sup>23</sup> The terror gradually abated but

was still occurring at the end of the year. It is estimated that, between 12 April and 31 December, up to 2,000 Communists and worker militants lost their lives and thousands more were arrested or fired from their jobs.<sup>24</sup>

### Shifting Strategy

The slaughter unleashed by Chiang Kai-shek exacerbated the conflict that was in full spate within the Soviet Communist Party between Joseph Stalin and the left opposition. Despite their profoundly different diagnoses, both sides ascribed the disaster to poor leadership and political errors. No doubt errors were inevitable, given the fast-changing circumstances. Nevertheless, the idea that the armed insurrection could have been successful with better leadership massively underplays the significance of the objective balance of military and political forces. As Mao Zedong recognised in August 1927, in a context where there was no centralised state power and society was severely fragmented, 'power comes from the barrel of a gun' (枪杆子里面出政权).<sup>25</sup> Only when the CCP finally had built its own armed force was it able to chart a way out of this deadlock. More positively, the uprisings firmed up a version of nationalism that defined the nation in terms of the common people and construed national liberation in terms not only of emancipation from warlordism and foreign control, but also of emancipation of the popular masses from poverty, exploitation, and ignorance.<sup>26</sup> This was to shape Chinese national identity in lasting ways.