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Book Review #7  
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12 November 1986 HIEU 585 Mr. Hammond

Brandt, Conrad. Stalin's Failure in China, 1924-1927.  
Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958. 226 pp.

Conrad Brandt in this book has attempted a difficult task: to explain the failure of Soviet policy in China in the 1920s. More specifically, he intends to reveal the errors of Leon Trotskii and Iosif Stalin in appraising events in China and to show the extent of their responsibility for the destruction of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Brandt is especially successful in proving that Trotskii's prophetic claims were "grossly exaggerated." (p. ix) Unfortunately, the book suffers from an extremely narrow focus on the Soviet domestic struggle and a correspondingly disjointed narrative. Both Chinese and Soviet sources, listed in an eight-page bibliography, are used, but perhaps due to their scarcity and reliability, the author is unable to clearly present anything exceptionally pathbreaking.

Lenin was the first Soviet leader to display an awareness that Asian nationalism could be used as an ally of the Western proletariat, but he never elaborated a clear, concrete strategy to be followed by Asian communists. Brandt correctly notes the importance of the theses adopted at the Second Congress of the Communist International (Comintern). The theses were written largely by Lenin, but after lengthy debate the contradictory theses of M. N. Roy were appended to Lenin's; thus two conflicting interpretations of the situation in Asia and the

tactics to be followed were approved by the Congress: Lenin's emphasis on communist support of bourgeois nationalist movements and Roy's insistence that communists should remain independent. Lenin also believed that the East was of secondary importance to the struggle in the West, while Roy thought that revolutions would originate first in the East. Despite this "dual" nature inherent in the theses, the fact that they were adopted by the Congress, which was dominated by Lenin, indicates that the theses were to be interpreted as having Lenin's approval.

Essentially, it was this inherent contradiction that spelled trouble for Chinese communists after Lenin's death when both Trotskii and Stalin, each emphasizing different tactics, claimed to be the true interpreters of Leninist strategy. Specifically, the problem lay in the relationship between the Kuomintang, created by Sun Yat-sen to control and exploit the communists, and the CCP. Somehow, communists were to enter the Kuomintang and conquer it from within by occupying key leadership positions and, simultaneously, from without by using mass organizations. In other words, the CCP was to use the Kuomintang to defeat feudal warlords while at the same time preparing for a communist revolution. It was a thin line to walk that above all required flexibility--a flexibility that was lacking because Stalin was both too ill-informed and increasingly forced to maintain stubborn support of an alliance because of his struggle with the "Left Opposition."

One of the strengths of Brandt's book is his treatment of

the Chinese Socialist (Communist) Youth Corps, a radical youth organization founded in 1920 before the CCP was formed. This organization repeatedly exhibited tendencies more radical, leftist than those approved by the Party. During the Northern Expedition, these "youth," without Party instructions, took on themselves the task of organizing the Chinese peasantry. In fact, though the CCP gained enormous influence as a result of the Expedition, it continued to lack any major command positions within the Kuomintang. Furthermore, it may be doubtful to even speak of a party at the time; for while showdown was fast approaching with both Chiang Kai-shek and the "leftist" Wuhan government, the CCP itself was disintegrating into regional organizations beyond the control of the Party center--a result of its own success.

Brandt uses to good advantage the Trotskii archives to show that Trotskii was no better a judge of events in China than Stalin and, more importantly, that Trotskii did not really become aware of the critical situation in China until March 1927. (After he had already been ousted from the Politburo.) This should indicate that the Chinese revolution was not considered important by the "opposition" until it was too late. Thus, while Brandt devotes considerable attention to the Chinese implications of the Stalin-Trotskii struggle and to their manipulations of Marxist-Leninist strategy, he is never really successful in placing that struggle in its proper context. Brandt's overemphasis on the Chinese revolution neglects the fact that the debate was conducted largely in

terms of industrialization policy and European strategy.

What eventually emerges from this narrative is the fact that Stalin's orders did temporarily destroy Chinese communism. Perhaps that was inevitable given the difficulty of communications with China, the international situation, and the internal struggle. What fails to emerge is the fact that the Soviet Union also made the Chinese revolution possible--something Brandt only briefly alludes to. (p. vii) The author fails, perhaps due to the lack of source material, to emphasize the crucial importance of Soviet material aid, moral inspiration, and political and military advice in making the Kuomintang a successful, nationalist, revolutionary party and in creating a CCP. The activities and influence of Soviet Comintern representatives, e.g. Mikhail Borodin, are never fairly discussed. These men were not simply bearers of Stalin's destructive orders but were also instrumental in moving the entire Chinese revolutionary movement forward. Illustrative of Brandt's omission, General Bluecher (Galen) is noted only twice in the entire text. (p. 111, 116)

Perhaps the biggest drawback to the book reflects Brandt's narrow approach to the subject. The author is unwilling to spend the necessary time to explain the chronology and importance of events in China. For example, Sun Yat-sen's death is mentioned, but it is never stated exactly when it occurred. Meanwhile Brandt is engaged in a long "aside" on Tai Chi-tao's emergence as the new theoretical spokesman of the CCP (pp.56-59). He then concludes: "but we must [now] go back to

1925." (p. 59) Such "asides" and "jumpings-ahead" only confuse the reader as to the actual course of events in China and evoke the suspicion that Brandt is using hindsight.

This book is naturally best read with some background knowledge of China. For example, Brandt's treatment of two important events leaves much to be desired. In May 1925 large-scale strikes in Japanese-owned mills in Shanghai led to the formation of a May 30 Movement dominated by the Chinese communists, but Brandt's cursory treatment leaves the reader unsure of its actual importance. He also, by lack of coverage, minimizes the importance of the Hong Kong strike committee and its successful embargo of foreign trade out of the harbor in 1925. Both of these events significantly increased the power and prestige of communists. Now if one considers that these incidents affected Japanese and British interests respectively, would it be too far-fetched to imagine Japanese-British intervention. This is something that Brandt discounts as sheer fantasy. "[The Politburo] grappled with the bogey of a possible new alliance...between Japan and Great Britain. It feared that both of these powers might combined might strangle the Chinese revolution and that--worse still-- they would pose a threat to the safety of Soviet Russia." (p. 73) Considering also the 1927 "war scare" after the Arcos Raid, the breaking of Soviet-British relations, the assassination of the Soviet ambassador in Poland, the raid on the Soviet embassy in Peking, the breaking of Chinese-Soviet relations, it does not seem to be too imaginary that the Soviet Union had to face the

possibility of Western intervention in China or the Soviet Union. Thus, a policy of restraint imposed on the CCP, a very small party at best, or a policy of separate negotiations with Peking, Manchuria, or Japan does not seem out-of-the-ordinary. It is important to remember that Soviet leaders faced many problems and were not solely preoccupied with Chinese events.

Finally, Brandt implies throughout his book that the Soviets were chiefly responsible for the Chinese disaster, and Stalin personally. But were they? Should one ask whether the CCP benefitted at all from its continuous, enforced participation in the Kuomintang? After all, even at the peak of the communist movement during the Northern Expedition, which was primarily successful because of the Kuomintang, the CCP remained very weak in relation to the Kuomintang's military and political power. In fact it seems that Chinese communists derived much benefit from the alliance, even though they were later betrayed, than if they had gone it alone. True, the question became: When should the CCP have left the Kuomintang? Would, however, the result have been different? Sooner or later communists would have become the enemies of the nationalist movement, and if the CCP had not cooperated with the Kuomintang, then it could not have reaped the benefits of the Northern Expedition; and most likely both would have been destroyed. As it was, despite the disaster of 1927, Chinese communism emerged strong enough to continue.

In conclusion, Brandt has attempted to explain Soviet policy regarding the Chinese revolution in the 1920s in terms

of the Stalin-Trotskii rivalry. He is at best partly successful. His narrative is poorly written and requires considerable effort to weave one's way through lengthy "asides" and speculative commentary. Aside from stylistic difficulties, the work suffers from the attempt to see the evil hand of Stalin everywhere.

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11-12-86