

THE 12 APRIL COUP OF 1927: ACTORS, MOTIVES, CONSEQUENCES Kirgizbaev N. (United States of America)

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Abstract: *this article analyzes the events that unfolded on April 12 of 1927 in Shanghai that altered the future course of Chinese history, and in particular change the course of development of the Chinese Communist Party.*

Keywords: *the Coup of April 12, Shanghai massacre, Chinese Communist Party, Chiang Kai-shek, Green Gang, Communist International, Guomindang.*

ПЕРЕВОРОТ 12 АПРЕЛЯ 1927 ГОДА: УЧАСТНИКИ, МОТИВЫ, ПОСЛЕДСТВИЯ Киригизбаев Н. (Соединенные Штаты Америки)

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Аннотация: *в данной статье анализируются события, произошедшие 12 апреля 1927 года в Шанхае, которые изменили дальнейший ход китайской истории и, в частности, изменили курс развития Коммунистической партии Китая.*

Ключевые слова: *переворот 12 апреля 1927 года, Шанхайская резня, Коммунистическая партия Китая, Чан Кайши, Зеленая банда, Коминтерн, Гоминьдан.*

The 12 April Coup of 1927, also referred to as the Shanghai massacre, was one of the turning points not only for the future course of development of the Chinese Communist movement but also defined the Chinese historical path in general. Particularly, as sinologist historian Marie-Claire Bergere points out, the Coup changed the course of contemporary Chinese history in the following ways: it ended the united front between the Nationalists and Communists, brought Chiang Kai-shek to power along with the establishment of his government in Nanjing, reduced foreign presence in China, and what is the most significant, reoriented the activities of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) toward the rural countryside (1, p. 198).

Considering the vastness of the discussion that may arise in covering all of the above-mentioned factors, this paper will therefore focus on one certain aspect. The primary aim of this paper is to take a deeper look at various forces (individuals and factions) that were involved in the Coup, the motives behind their participation, and the consequences. Within this structure, the roles played by Guomindang (GMD) and CCP, as well as secret societies, labor unions, elite bourgeoisie, foreign concessions, and Communist International (Comintern) will be reviewed.

Along with the book *Shanghai: China's Gateway to Modernity* by Marie-Claire Bergere, two additional sources are going to be used. One of the sources *A Road is Made: Communism in Shanghai 1920-1927* by Stephen Smith discusses the practical activities of CCP in Shanghai, in a city, which he describes, was “the bastion of a hybrid culture – part urban, part peasant, part western, part Chinese – a matrix of sharp social and cultural contradictions that exerted a solvent effect on the traditional order” (3, p. 2). One of the main ideas of the book is to show the importance of CCP’s formation in a domestic context and at the same time to challenge the tendencies which minimize the influence of external forces (3, pp. 4-5).

The second source *The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution* was written by Harold Isaacs and first published in England in 1938 with subsequent revised versions printed in 1951 and 1961. The reason for the use of this book is the author’s personal experience of the events and his ability to present first-hand information using newspaper and magazine articles of that time, as well as individual accounts. As Isaacs admits himself, the book was written in the first place as an attempt to show how the indigenous revolutionary process unfolded at an early date in China and to serve against Stalin’s dictatorial destructive influence on revolutionary movements elsewhere in the world (2, p. xv).

Despite the unexpected and surprising nature of the events that began on the morning of April 12, the Coup was not an instantaneous event and preparations for it were taking place for quite some time. According to Smith, the plan to liquidate the pickets was worked out by three Green Gang leaders – Huang Jinrong, Du Yuesheng, and Zhang Xiaolin. Their goal was to stop Communists from jeopardizing the gang’s monopoly on the opium trade and control over the labor recruitment and executing other racketeering activities. Furthermore, gang members were trying to show their usefulness to the new political leaders (3, p. 190).

Along with planning and preparation activities, the Green Gang was put in charge of carrying out the covert operations during the Coup. They were to break up the unions and disarm the pickets. In order to weaken the

Communists and their organizational structure beforehand, Du Yuesheng created the Shanghai General Labor Federation (GLF) that was sought to compete against the Communist-controlled General Labor Union (GLU). The armed support for the GLF was provided by the Common Progress Society (1, p. 196).

The Common Progress Society (*Gongjinhui*), named after the revolutionary organization established in May of 1907 to overthrow the Qing dynasty, used various ways to recruit new members. Most of the new members were the secret-society members or just the recruits who did not care about the ideological motives and were involved on materialistic grounds. Additionally, on April 1 an advertisement urging the veterans of the original movement to 'support the national flag, strengthen the people's will and submission to the Three Principles' was issued (3, p. 191).

Enlistment of new members had to be supported financially and it is alleged that Chiang Kai-shek offered \$600,000 to crush the General Labor Union, although Du Yuesheng dismissed this argument and claimed to have raised the money by the gang itself (3, p. 190). Considering the profits received from the opium trade and other illegal activities this statement can be regarded as plausible.

Sources also present various versions of GLU chair Wang Shouhua's death, where Du Yuesheng was directly involved. According to Smith, on the night of 11 April Wang was invited to dine at the home of Du Yuesheng in the French Concession. Upon the arrival, Wang was trussed in a sack, bundled in a car, and driven to a remote wood, where he was severely beaten and buried alive (3, p. 200). Bergere, on the other hand, states that after being abducted Wang was strangled and his corpse dumped on wasteland (1, p. 197).

Chiang Kai-shek might have not provided directly financed or participated in the Coup, but he undoubtedly was in charge of the situation and every action had to receive his consent. He could not just rely on force and did not openly renounce the policy of a united front, but definitely took steps necessary to maintain and strengthen his power. Shanghai was the epicenter of the revolutionary movement at that time and many actors' interests were involved in everything that happened in it, so Chiang Kai-shek had "to reassure foreigners, rally the bourgeoisie, and neutralize the insurgents and their sympathizers" to move on with his plans (1, p. 196).

Chiang's behavior and actions were always concealed making it difficult to counteract him. This was probably due to the complexity of the situation and his mistrust of the Communists all along. As Bergere notes, during his years under Sun Yat-sen's leadership Chiang visited Moscow and returned from there "deeply suspicious of Soviet intentions in China" (1, p. 195). But understanding his inability to gain the overall control immediately, he waited patiently and effectively used various conflicting sides to pursue his interests. At first, Chiang collaborated with Comintern advisors to organize the National Revolutionary Army (NRA), and once in control of the military apparatus used it to distance his rivals and to limit the influence of the Soviet advisers (1, p. 195).

So, if GMD under the Chiang Kai-shek was in a united front with the CCP, and the latter was assisting the nationalist movement in its advancement of the Northern Expedition (*Beifa*), why did Chiang support the purge against the communists in Shanghai? One of the explanations is that he might have felt militarily vulnerable and decided to liquidate the Communist challenge with outside help and consolidate his power (3, p. 190). The reasoning for this was the growing conflict between the left and right-wing nationalists within GMD, and the power struggle with the Communist leadership in Wuhan.

The deciding factor in disagreement within the internal camp were the Guomindang right-wing leaders who called to "protect the party and save the country" or in other words to exclude the Communists and expel the Soviet advisers (1, p. 196). They drew up a list of 197 Communists holding important positions in the GMD who were to be removed and on 10 April officially requested the Shanghai executive bureau to suppress the CCP conspirators (3, p. 192). Thus it can be assumed, that the presence of such a strong force could have obliged Chiang to follow their directives even though he was still aiming to use the united front to fight the warlords.

Another decisive factor was the position of the local bourgeoisie that were showing the growing signs of discontent with the GLU and Communists for their role in mobilizing the mass strikes that were disrupting business' normal functioning. Before the Coup, on March 29 a delegation from the Commercial Association and Shanghai Bankers Association met with Chiang Kai-shek and promised financial support if he guaranteed stable conditions for commerce and industry. Eventually, businessmen transferred over \$10 million to Chiang but underestimated one fact, that it was not the last time they emptied their purses (3, p. 192).

Chiang Kai-shek also had to consider the wishes of the foreigners in Shanghai who provided the city an opportunity to enjoy greater autonomy and privileges under the Treaty Port agreements (1, p. 3). Not only did foreign concessions urge GMD to eliminate Communists but they "co-operated directly in the reign of terror" (2, p. 180). French authorities, for example, provided weapons, cover, and safe passage for the gang members (1, p. 197). On April 11, in the International Settlement, foreign municipal forces backed by the British and Japanese forces carried out raids, some of which extended into the Chinese quarters of the city (2, p. 180).

Communist insurgents organized around the GLU and despite having up to 4,000 armed pickets and a large number of sympathizers were not properly organized (Smith, p. 198). According to Smith, picket members represented diverse groups ranging from secret societies, NRA irregulars, workers, and even the former soldiers of the northern armies. Secondly, despite the common perceptions, they were disliked by the common people who complained of their bullying and money extortions (3, p. 197).

The situation was complicated by the regular cooperation between the GLU and other factions that ultimately turned against each other. Wang Shouhua and many other Communists were numerous times released from the police detention, as well as from other captors after Du Yuesheng interceded on their behalf. There are some suggestions that the Green Gang offered to reorganize and put itself under the CCP's control if the party did not interfere with its opium and gambling activities (3, p. 191). The Communists could be partly held responsible for their defeat since not only did they appreciate Du Yuesheng's efforts or tried to gradually absorb the gang's members, but they never hesitated to strike at secret-society bosses who stood in their way.

Wang Shouhua also courted local business leaders and promised them that the pickets would not disrupt their activities and existed only for self-defense and to maintain order. However, he stated that workers were not ignorant more and urged to raise their wages, the fact that the bourgeoisie would not accept (3, p. 192). The main concern of the entrepreneurs was to continue their activities and by the logic of business, they would not tolerate any competition or obstacles that the Communist insurgents from the GLU were causing them.

GLU and local Communists were further disoriented by contradictory and inconsistent policies from their superiors. On the one hand, as early as 31 March the Chinese Executive Committee (CEC) of Comintern sent a telegram to Moscow informing that Chiang Kai-shek already started the Coup and in response, the Soviet Politburo replied not to engage in an armed conflict and hide the weapons. On the other hand, the Comintern agent in Wuhan Grigori Voitinski sent a directive to resist Chiang Kai-shek if the latter tries to disperse the provisional municipal government (3, p. 198).

Chiang Kai-shek, following the internal contradiction within the CCP, seized a chance to exploit this opportunity in his favor. He tried to calm the GLU leaders, expressed his support for a general strike, and promised not to use force to disarm the pickets (3, p. 199). Furthermore, the true intentions of the GMD were clouded by the remarks of its left-wing leader Wang Jingwei, who also confirmed the party's goal to continue a united front and issued a joint statement with CCP leader Chen Duxiu (3, p. 199).

Regardless of all the negotiations, deals, and agreements, the purge took place on April 12 and amounted to great casualties for CCP. As Bergere states, the White Terror continued for two weeks following the Coup and claimed more than 5,000 victims, either shot or vanished. Moreover, the organized forces of revolutionary trade unionism were broken up, leading the CCP and GLU to go underground (1, p. 201). According to Smith, the terror continued until the end of 1927 causing the death of more than 2,000 Communists and worker militants in Shanghai, and thousands of more arrests. The membership in the Shanghai regional branch of the Communist Party fell from 8,000 to a little over 1,000 (3, p. 204).

The events leading to the Coup, its course, and the outcome revealed the deep-rooted differences at the highest level of Comintern and Soviet Communist Party leadership which echoed through the contradictory policies aimed at developing the Communist movement in China. CCP, following the Comintern's position, formulated by Stalin concerning the Coup, laid the blame on the Trotskyists and Chen Duxiu among them for pursuing "right-wing opportunism" (1, p. 201). Moreover, according to Comintern, although Chiang's Coup shifted the balance of power to the right, it did not terminate the united front. It rather purified and strengthened the left (3, p. 207).

The 12 April Coup gave the critics a chance not only to question and discuss the individual factors related to this event but also provided an opportunity to express opinions about the overall conditions present at that time for a Communist revolution in China. Stephen Smith, citing Hans van de Ven, states, that "the brute reality was that a national revolution based on workers and peasants, capable of proceeding in a socialist direction, could not have succeeded in 1927 because the balance of military and political forces was overwhelmingly against it" (3, p. 208). He further notes that Comintern's misguided strategy was built upon the mechanical application of European experience without considering the Chinese realities (3, p. 210).

Some authors also argue that the Coup proved how far the Comintern leadership was willing to go to sacrifice the interests of the Chinese revolution. According to Harold Isaacs, the central idea allowed to follow was Stalin's objective that the only ally in the revolution was the Chinese ruling class (2, p. 184). Isaacs then presents an interesting citation which he traces to Comintern spokesperson that "The treason of Chiang Kai-shek was not unexpected" (2, p. 185).

The 12 April Coup is just one of the many events that took place during the formation of the CCP and in Chinese history in general. Yet it displays the different parties involved, with their agenda, goals, and perspectives. It shows how former allies and partners in a blink of an eye can turn into enemies, but more importantly, it reveals how they

can be manipulated and used by various forces in pursuing the greater objectives. The struggle during the purge was not just a class struggle, but a conflict between two competing ideologies of the time. A struggle – that was tacitly carried under the pretext of the nationalist revolutionary movement.

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