Stalin and the Chinese Communist Dissidents

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The Trotskyist Left Opposition challenged the Stalinists on many issues. One of the most important was bureaucratisation of the Bolshevik party government apparatus. Trotsky and his co-thinkers did not accept Stalin’s antidemocratic perceptions of the intra-party organisation. They contrasted his policy of tough centralisation with the romantic idea of a ‘democratic’ communist party in which, as they believed, ‘the necessary balance between elements of democracy and centralism’ \(^1\) would be maintained. They also disagreed with Stalin’s repudiation of world-wide revolution, arguing that without the victory of the proletariat in the main countries of Europe it was impossible to arrive at socialism in a backward Russia. The Trotskyists could find no ground with the Stalinists on various other issues of internal and foreign policy too, including the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP’s) tactics in the Chinese Revolution. Trotsky, for example, supported the independence of the CCP in its 1924–7 united front with the Guomindang, underlining that the Communists’ true aim was to prepare the workers’ liberation.

The ideas of the Oppositionists affected all local sections of the Communist International. By the end of 1927, Trotskyist factions had emerged in most Communist parties. At that time, however, the Stalinists managed to suppress the Opposition in the Soviet Union itself. In November 1927, Trotsky was expelled from the Bolshevik Party. In 1928, other members of his group were deported to remote areas in the Soviet Union, and, early in 1929, Trotsky was deported. However, Oppositionist propaganda against Stalinism continued into the 1930s.

The Soviet secret police and intelligence service as well as the Comintern officials directed by Stalin himself did their best to stop anti-Stalin activity among dissident foreign Communists. Particular attention was paid to the Oppositionists in the CCP inasmuch as the CCP was the second biggest section – after the Bolshevik Party – of the Communist International.

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\(^1\) Trotsky 1985 [1941], p. 140.
When did Stalin start persecuting the Chinese Communist dissidents and what was the outcome? The disclosing of the voluminous Stalin files shortly after the collapse of the USSR laid the foundation for a scholarly inquiry of this topic. These files are now preserved in the State Archives of Social and Political History (RGASPI in a Russian abbreviation.) This depository also received Stalin's documents from the top secret Archives of the President of the Russian Federation. Apart from the Stalin collections, invaluable material can also be found in the archives of the CCP's delegation to the Comintern Executive (ECCI), of the Soviet international schools of the 1920s and 1930s, and of the Internal Opposition in the Bolshevik Party. Personal dossiers of the members of the CCP, Soviet Communists, and employees of the Executive Committee of the Comintern are also interesting. Of interest also are the files of the head of the Comintern Executive Committee Georgi M. Dimitrov's Secretariat and the Comintern International Control Commission.

These collections contain minutes of interrogations and testimonies of arrested Chinese Trotskyists, coded telegrams from Soviet and Comintern agents in China, records of Stalin's meetings with Soviet and Chinese officials, information from the Soviet secret police and intelligence service, including Russian translations of foreign diplomatic letters intercepted by the police Foreign Department, as well as Chinese Communist and Comintern correspondence.

The evidence supports the view that the formation of the Chinese anti-Stalinist Communist Opposition was triggered by the activities of Soviet Stalinists who insisted in the autumn of 1926 on drawing Chinese students at Soviet international schools into their struggle against the Trotskyist minority in the Bolshevik Party. Until then, there were no supporters of the Opposition among the Chinese Communists either in China or in Russia, for the simple reason that they knew nothing about the debate. By October 1926, the Bolshevik Central Committee had decided to spread the struggle to the international schools. In the 1920s, Chinese revolutionaries studied at a number of these schools, including the Communist University of the Toilers of the East (established in April 1921), Sun Yat-sen University of the Toilers of China (opened in November 1925; in September 1928, it was renamed the Communist University of the Toilers of China), the International Lenin School (set up in 1925), and some others. Most were students at Sun Yat-sen University, where the rector was Karl Radek, a prominent Oppositionist. In 1919, Radek was a co-organiser of the Comintern and until 1923 worked as a secretary of this international organisation. Then he joined Trotsky in his struggle against Stalin and was dismissed from the office. He was rector of Sun Yat-sen University from 1925 until 1927 and considered by many in the Comintern as an expert in Chinese