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China's Blue Republic

(1912-49)

by Gwydion M Williams

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Stalin: Paradoxes of Power

1878-1928 (volume 1).

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China's Blue Republic (1912-49)

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How Not To Modernise

China's 'Blue Republic' lasted from 1912 to 1949, and achieved nothing.

It achieved nothing because it was trying to erect a copy of the complex political structures of the USA or Western Europe on top of a society that had very different value. And doing it with a false understanding of the intricate political processes that had occurred there.

China faced the extra problem that Europe's global Empires wanted either to carve up China between them, or else keep it as a weak state that they could make money out of. It would have needed boldness and a willingness to suffer in order to force those countries to accept China as an equal, particularly since almost all of them viewed Chinese as an inferior race. It was not impossible: Mustafa Kemal Ataturk had managed it with a vigorous Turkish Republic that replaced the decaying Ottoman Empire. But no one before Mao actually managed it, for reasons this article will explain.

In *Problems 21: Why a sophisticated Empire could not modernise*, I explained why the values that allowed science and modern industry in Europe are not easy things to copy. And that Europe had taken centuries to adjust, with most states including the USA relying on a population that was familiar with existing politics and accepted it as the natural order.

The newly independent USA with its 1789 Constitution created a Republican copy of the familiar British government, with a President in place of a monarch and a Senate in place of the House of Lords, consisting originally of members appointed by the governments of each State.

Because US government worked, people got the notion that if you drew up the proper

constitution and dumped it on an existing population, all would be well. The dominant strain in Western cultures learn nothing from a string of failures, from Revolutionary France down to the disintegrating state that the US imposed on Iraq after first carefully uprooting an intolerant but functional Baathist state. So **the failure of the Western-style Chinese Republic was a thoroughly normal event.** What would have been surprising would have been if it had succeeded without power passing to some authoritarian leader, which is the normal mode of state-building.

The period 1912-49 in China is commonly called 'Nationalist'. But at no time did it have a functional government that deserved the name *Nationalist*. A minority of the warlords tried to be, and nowadays get listed as 'patriotic' by Beijing. But the people on top never dared to insist that China would now be asserting the same rights as the Imperial powers that had broken open the traditional system with the Opium Wars and other interventions. And they did not dare, because they were not integrated with the society they were perched on top of.

This tradition of weakness and failure was continued by the majority-section of Kuomintang led by Chiang Kaishek¹ after its 1927 break with the Communists and with his own party's anti-Imperialist mission. The name means 'China's National People's Party', but that was not what they were while in power in Mainland China. Only in exile in Taiwan did they get back to being functional nationalists, with massive US support and with a society that the Japanese had modernised without

¹ I use the Wade-Giles forms Chiang Kaishek and Kuomintang rather than the now-standard Pinyin versions Jiang Jieshi and Guomindang, because these remain the norm in recent Western books.

regard for what the Taiwanese wanted. It also helped that the local landlords had no connection with the Kuomintang, so that a radical land reform was possible.

You can't have a dynamic society built on top of a passive and superstitious population with few concerns beyond its own village or town life. Mao gets bitched about by most Western commentators and many Chinese dissidents, because of the simplistic and sometimes destructive methods he used to create dynamism right through the society. Much worse things and greater intolerance in imposing ideas had happened in Europe's own modernisation, which also had decades and centuries to work in.

The liberal fantasy of Free Individuals choosing harmonious government under a sensible constitution was never going to happen. But modernisation without a radical cultural break might have happened, if there had been a competent leader in the right place at the right time. As I said in the previous article, I'd place a lot of blame on the three major leaders of China's period of weakness: the Dowager Empress Cixi, General Yuan Shikai and Chiang Kai-shek. Cuckoos, people who were brilliant at gaining and holding onto power, but unable to do anything useful with it. In general terms they wanted to modernise China, but all of them expected the bulk of the population to stay passive. That article explained why Cixi was a disaster from almost any possible point of view.

(Almost any – Jung Chang of *'Mao the Unknown Story'* fame believes that the lady was wonderful because her rule included a few reforms, every one of them too little and too late. Virtually everyone else who's studied Cixi says that she doomed the dynasty.)

The Revolution of 1911-12 was more ethnic than cultural: the much more numerous Han elite wanted to remove the ethnic discrimination that the Manchu dynasty hung on to until the bitter end. But that I have already written about. In this article I will explain why the other two 'cuckoos' also failed. But first, a second look the success they were aiming for. The matters I detailed in the previous article, the remarkable success of Japan.

Japan actually was and is much less Westernised than it appears. Modern industry they managed fine, and also science, producing some highly original work. European Imperialism in its pre-1914 mode they copied with lethal accuracy as Imperial

Japan. As for politics, I'd view Japan's political Westernisation before World War Two as window-dressing. There was a Japanese parliament, but it never fought the Emperor's government in the way that all European parliaments had fought their monarchs on occasion. It was never really in command, and quietly let itself be shunted aside in the crisis of the 1930s. Meantime the actual government of Japan was strong because it was accepted by the Emperor. Most Japanese saw the Emperor as the only true source of legitimate political authority.

A similar system might have emerged in China, if the ingenious fools at the Imperial Court had not murdered the Reform Emperor. But in any case, many Chinese doubted that the Manchu Dynasty was legitimate. Replacing the Japanese Imperial House was unthinkable: it claimed an unbroken male lineage that goes back more than 2,600 years. Most Japanese did not question this claim, which indeed is probably true. The Manchu Dynasty lasted 268 years and hung on to customs reflecting its origins on the fringes of China, emphasising its distinctness from the majority of those it ruled. And replacing one dynasty by another was normal in China, justified in tradition by a transfer of the Mandate of Heaven from the loser to the winner.

The Blue Republic's official beginning was a partly successful rebellion that began with the Wuchang Uprising of 10th October 1911. The rebels soon controlled a big chunk of South China and officially declared a republic on January 1912. But there was still an Imperial government in Beijing, solidly controlling North China and backed by China's most modern and powerful armies. No one could predict who would win – but the outcome of later conflicts suggests it would have been the North Chinese armies.

February 1912 saw an uneasy compromise: Yuan Shikai as the top general sold out the dynasty in return for becoming President. There were elections in 1913, but these were successfully ignored by Yuan Shikai and his northern armies, who won a brief civil war. The man then tried to found a new dynasty – not an impossible aim, Reza Shah Pahlavi managed it in Persia in 1925, founding a dynasty that lasted till the Islamic Revolution overthrew his son in 1979. But Yuan Shikai was too blatantly a double-crosser to achieve a similar success in China. His subordinate generals forced him to back down and he died

soon afterwards.

By 1920, China was what we'd nowadays call a Failed State. A dose of Leninism gave the Kuomintang movement enough coherence to impose a kind of unity in 1927. But the Kuomintang under Chiang Kai-shek were weak from the start. They were scared of their own peasantry, and were also continuously intimidated by foreign powers, especially the Japanese.

The failure of the Blue Republic makes no sense in terms of current Western ideologies. Most Western 'experts' take an attitude of 'There is a fault in reality: please do not adjust your mind'.² (This was a hippy slogan from the 1960s, when many of them grew up, in as far as they did grow up.)

How do they see it? Something like:

Being open to free trade and having Western-style elections are the right solution for all times and for all men. (Or for all persons, rather, using an updated language that emerged quite spontaneously and inevitably, in no way connected with the needless aggression on the matter shown by Radical Feminists.) It has to work, so even when it does not work, it should be tried again. Mao must be bad-mouthed for finding a different solution, because 'everyone knows' that things that did not happen in observable reality were always just about to happen and could be safely expected on the basis of the Superior Wisdom of the New Right.

This is the same wisdom that most of them showed in Iraq and Afghanistan, and with the financial regulation de-regulation leading to their system's near-collapse in 2008.

That is the mainstream modern attitude, and even the species of nonsense it talks is an indication of how far socialism and radicalism have managed to make the Centre-Right profoundly different, though not wiser. Before that – right up to 1949 – the most widely believed explanation for Chinese failure was a racist one. Chinese were seen as inferior 'Chinks', admirable as individual workers and small business people, but incapable of getting things right when they tried to copy the higher

² This was a parody of the standard announcement when BBC television had a problem: 'There is a fault in transmission, please do not adjust your set'. In the 1960s, televisions had control knobs at the back, 'vertical hold' and 'horizontal hold' etc. that ordinary users might need to adjust. 'Do not adjust your mind' might be seen as a joke, but there were plenty of people around who saw it as a kind of deep truth.

levels of Western culture.

There were enough examples of bad organisation by Chinese who tried to Westernise to encourage this view. After 1949, it was supposed that the Russians had taken over China, or else that things had got worse, or maybe both. The first view was dominant in the West up to the Sino-Soviet break. It was then doubted that Chinese could manage without Russian help: Khrushchev's withdrawing 1400 Soviet technicians in 1960 only made sense if he believed so.

The 'Three Bitter Years' of 1959 to 1961 were seen at the time as the final collapse. But then China bounced back much stronger, and the fashion shifted to presenting the country as a place full of menacing 'Blue Ants', a reaction to the egalitarian dress-style of the time.

(No one seems to have noticed the parallels to England's own Puritans, which extended even to the wanton destruction of the Sacred Symbols and Cultural Heritage of the old order. Or to have seen the Cultural Revolution as a Marxist analogue of the various Religious Revivals that that have happened within Christianity. In particular the various Great Awakenings that happened in the USA, which are little known in Britain but which had an enormous amount to do with making the USA different from Britain. This is another illustration of how you can't understand the problems of China's modernisation and Westernisation unless you have a correct understanding of how similar transitions happened in the West.)

Today's crop of Western commentators prefer not to say much about the typical Western view of China before the 1980s, or else are ignorant of it. An ordinary reader might think themselves well-informed about the subject and still know nothing of the Western prejudices of the time, which have been dropped into oblivion. But the material is still around, in out-of-print books that were taken seriously at the time. For instance

- *The blue ants: 600 million Chinese under the Red Flag* by Robert Guillain
- *The Blue Ants. The first authentic account of the Russian-Chinese War of 1970* by Bernard Newman
- *Mao Tse-Tung, Emperor of the Blue Ants* by George Palocz-Horvath.

I remembered one of these as a library book from the 1960s, and googled for the rest. I also happened to find in a second-hand book shop the 1961 Arrow edition of a rather

improbable thriller by Dennis Wheatley called *The Island Where Time Stands Still*,³ which says in its back-cover blurb "a fantastic tangle of slit-eyed intrigue and murder in China".⁴ (Wheatley is largely forgotten nowadays, but from the 1930s to the 1960s his books sold millions.⁵)

Governing China

To understand China, you need to look first at the various human norms that existed historically. Norms painfully invented, discovered or re-discovered as human technology slowly advance. Emerged as people began living in increasingly large and powerful communities.

From the Neolithic, human communities split themselves up into households that increasingly farmed their own land or practiced their own trade or handicraft. Being a ruler was just another trade, though a trade that grew increasingly important as communities got bigger. In small communities there was usually one Chief, the person that everyone talked to about matters of common concern. The Chief would usually need to talk to a wider group, to Elders or to a gathering of the whole community.

As communities got bigger, a meeting of the whole population stopped being practical. Chieftains became Kings and mostly managed to discard their Elders, though sometimes the Elders discarded the King, as happened in many city-states, including Republican Rome. Rule by Elders *ought* to work better than rule by a single individual, and sometimes it did, but more often it was weak and confused. Yet monarchs might also be weak, and others became monsters. Even the best of them abused power and demanded absurd rituals around their persons.

Government is always imperfect and often unjust. I can understand why many good people decide that the state as such was the problem, or that civilisation itself was a mistake. But after much thought, I decided that this approach was not feasible even if it were desirable. I come back to the original answer given by Marx and Engels: that we advance to something much better, with

capitalism and parliamentary rule as mere intermediates on the road to something higher.

(I'll also explain in a future article how both the Great Leap and the Cultural Revolution were premature attempts by Mao to reach this enigmatic 'something higher'. But before that I will detail in other articles how Mao had previously gone against accepted wisdom and been correct, which is why he was trusted in his final bold leaps.)

In China, a tradition of 'Sacred Kings' was established early and became a fixed part of the culture. So too did the idea that an existing dynasty might exhaust the 'Mandate of Heaven', which would be viewed as having passed to the successful rebel who replaced them. Maybe by someone with no claim to distinguished ancestry, as with the founder of the highly successful Han Dynasty, and also the Ming founder. The Taiping Rebellion tapped those same feelings and came close to created a new China based on an eccentric and egalitarian version of Christianity, the creed of the frightening foreigners who had humbled the old dynasty. The Han gentry defeated the Taiping and then tried to rebuild China under the authority of the existing dynasty, the 'Self-Strengthening Movement. When this failed, everything became uncertain.

A successful new government that was not revolutionary would have had to blend a lot of rival elements: a ruling elite that was mostly Manchu, the gentry who were mostly Han and the common people (almost all Han) who resented both the gentry and the Manchu. It would also have needed a source of legitimacy. In Japan, the ruling elite of the Shogun's government could be displaced by an alternative and much older source of legitimacy, the 'Sacred King' or Emperor. The Japanese gentry were content with this – the formal privileges of the Samurai were ended, but they retained their social standing and wealth.

Japan had other advantages. Unlike China, there was no strong tradition of peasant revolts in Japan. Most of what are described as revolts seem more like riots about purely local issues, 'petitioning with violence'. The society was also far more integrated, since Japan had not been pumped full of opium by foreign traders. And Japan had reacted quite fast, for a traditional and pre-industrial government. Commodore Perry had arrived with his intimidating 'Black Ships' in 1853 and 1854: the Emperor replaced the Shogun in

³ <https://www.flickr.com/photos/45909111@N00/6447307275/in/album-72157608614718792/>

⁴ <https://www.flickr.com/photos/45909111@N00/6447307721/in/album-72157608614718792/>

⁵ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dennis_Wheatley for details.

1868.

In China, too little had been done during the decades after the Opium Wars. The traditional structures of loyalty had rotted away. But there was nothing that was both new and strong waiting to take power when the old system collapsed. Still, as late as 1909, an intelligent US observer could still think that moderate reform was possible. They did at least recognise what was missing:

"The change which China is undergoing at present may be expressed by saying that Chinese society is becoming political. Hitherto it has lived from generation to generation by custom, with no consciousness of political aims or purposes; nor has the government itself been influenced in its action by definite policies. Secure in its authority, it has selected its servants on the basis of examination tests...

"Chinese self-complacency suffered a rude shock in the Japanese War of 1894. On account of the lack of centralization and of a common patriotism, this shock would probably have remained without a deep influence upon Chinese life had it not been followed by other and more serious catastrophes. It was, however, the signal for inroads upon China by all sorts of political and economic influences from without. The division of China impended. The masses of the people, at first vaguely restless, were soon deeply moved by fears and passions akin to panic, unrestrained yes, even assisted, by high officials who were themselves not clear in their political aims. So they rushed headlong into new trouble by attacking the foreigners and their legations. [*The Boxer Rebellion.*] Again China was to receive a poignant impression of her own weakness. This warning was accentuated when Russia made herself at home in Manchuria, and refused to listen to Chinese demands. The militant and political genius of Japan evinced itself; by contrast with Japanese victories and diplomatic successes, the Chinese at last came to perceive the depth of inefficiency to which their national life had sunk...

"To transform the easy-going system of administration, under which the Empire had lived for centuries in time of peace and in the absence of all foreign competition, into a centralized, modern engine of national action, is in itself an undertaking that calls for the greatest originality and statesmanship. But the educated people of China were not satisfied to have the government concern itself with the administration alone. They instinctively centred all their demands about the cry for a national parliament. How could the nation be one before there had been created an organ to express its national public opinion? It was argued that, as all efficient countries are provided with parliaments, as Japan

had strengthened herself by creating such an institution, the establishment of a national assembly must be the first step of actual reform. Thus reasoned reformers of all degrees of radicalism...

"The privileged position occupied by Manchu officials had long been irksome to the influential Chinese. The mitigation of these jealousies, the unification of these two elements in the official world, or at all events the adjustment of their mutual claims, was therefore one of the first problems to be faced. The Empress Dowager always had reason to fear that the great national renaissance in China might take an anti-dynastic direction. The efforts of high Manchu officials to avoid such a result led them, in 1900, to make common cause with the Boxers. From the point of view of the imperial house, it is a most serious question how far the nationalist enthusiasm and tendencies can be harmonized with continuance of Manchu domination. That the true solution lies in the absorption of the Manchus by the mass of the Chinese people, and in the suppression of artificial privileges, is recognized by the government, many of whose recent measures have been based upon such a policy...

"With all the bickerings in the Japanese parliament, it has on the whole assisted in binding the national loyalty to the government, and it has certainly brought about a stronger national feeling. But China differs from Japan in being a federal state. The Chinese provinces, vast nations in themselves, could never be reduced to the level of mere administrative circumscriptions, like the Japanese fu, or the French prefecture. In this matter the constitutions of such countries as the United States, Germany, and India, have much to teach the Chinese. It is indeed one of the major problems in Chinese legislation to-day how to adjust the relations of the provinces to the strong central authority which is being created. So far very little headway has been made in working out a definite and clear system of the relations between the provinces and the central government. The constitution of Germany is much admired in China. What makes it attractive is the importance of the imperial office, as well as the fact that the federal relation is effectively elaborated, and that the popular element in the state is reconciled with the demands of a powerful central administration."⁶

It didn't happen, though a routinely competent leader might indeed have saved the dynasty. At the time there were many who still trusted their traditional rulers, including a teenager called Mao Zedong. As he explained

⁶ Reinsch, Paul S. *A Parliament for China* by *The Atlantic Monthly*, December 1909; Volume 104, No. 6; pages 790 - 797.
<http://www.theatlantic.com/unbound/flashbks/china/parliament.htm>

when he gave his highly politicised account of his life to Edgar Snow in the late 1930s:

"I recall also that at about this time [1910] I first heard that the Emperor and Tzu Hsi, the Empress Dowager, were both dead, although the new Emperor, Hsuan T'ung [P'u Yi], had already been ruling for two years. I was not yet an antimonarchist; indeed, I considered the Emperor as well as most officials to be honest, good, and clever men. They only needed the help of K'ang Yu-wei's reforms."⁷

Mao was born in 1893, so he'd have been in his mid-teens. He was an exceptionally bright and well-informed and did well at school, yet he didn't learn about the change in rulers until two years after it happened. That's how detached a traditional Chinese government was

Young Mao also had a long-standing pattern of being rebellious against his father and his teachers, but he had not at that time extended his rebelliousness to the distant Supreme Rulers. There were probably many young men with much the same attitudes, and they were a potential source of strength, if the government had shown itself worthy of respect. The Manchus in their last days did nothing coherent and public opinion began to stir. As Mao described it:

"The anti-foreign-capital movement began in connection with the building of the Szechuan-Hankow railway, and a popular demand for a parliament became widespread. In reply to it the Emperor decreed merely that an advisory council be created. The students in my school became more and more agitated. They demonstrated their anti-Manchu sentiments by a rebellion against the pigtail. One friend and I clipped off our pigtails, but others, who had promised to do so, afterward failed to keep their word. My friend and I therefore assaulted them in secret and forcibly removed their queues, a total of more than ten falling victim to our shears. Thus in a short space of time I had progressed from ridiculing the False Foreign Devil's imitation queue to demanding the general abolition of queues. How a political idea can change a point of view!...

"On the following day, a tutu government was organized. Two prominent members of the Ke Lao Hui [Elder Brother Society] were made tutu and vice-tutu [military governors]...The new tutu and vice-tutu did not last long. They were not bad men, and had some revolutionary intentions, but they were poor and represented the interests of the oppressed. The

landlords and merchants were dissatisfied with them. Not many days later, when I went to call on a friend, I saw their corpses lying in the street. T'an Yen-k'ai had organized a revolt against them, as representative of the Hunan landlords and militarists.

"Many students were now joining the army. A student army had been organized and among these students was T'ang Sheng-chih. I did not like the student army; I considered the basis of it too confused. I decided to join the regular army instead, and help complete the revolution. The Ch'ing Emperor had not yet abdicated, and there was a period of struggle.

"The outcome of the revolution was not yet decided. The Ch'ing had not wholly given up power, and there was a struggle within the Kuomintang concerning the leadership. It was said in Hunan that further war was inevitable. Several armies were organized against the Manchus and against Yuan Shih-k'ai. Among these was the Hunan army. But just as the Hunanese were preparing to move into action, Sun Yat-sen and Yuan Shih-k'ai came to an agreement, the scheduled war was called off, North and South were 'unified,' and the Nanking Government was dissolved. Thinking the revolution was over, I resigned from the army and decided to return to my books. I had been a soldier for half a year."⁸

A Republic Without a Public

The Manchu elite fell because they prized their racial privileges above all else. The government remained overwhelmingly Manchu to the bitter end, even though Manchus were a tiny minority of the population. They sidelined the most powerful Han, General Yuan Shikai. Excluding the treacherous general would have been a good idea if they'd brought in many other Han to share power with, but they did not. Faced with revolution in the south in 1911, they brought back Yuan Shikai, who had the loyalty of the modern armed forces that he'd trained. Unsurprisingly, he reached a deal with the Sun Yatsen and other republicans that made him President of the new Republic.

(Such suicidal behaviour by elites is quite common. Britain lost its North American colonies by rejecting the initial modest demand for a few MPs in the Westminster Parliament: 'no taxation without representation. Then lost India by racist exclusion of the Hindus and Muslims whom they had educated in Western ways and who were often better qualified than the white elite that hung onto its position to the bitter end.)

⁷ Four chapters of Edgar Snow's *Red Star Over China*. Available on-line at http://www.humanrights-china.org/meetingchina/menu_leader_m01.htm. I will say a lot more about this in future articles.

⁸ Ibid.

The 1911-12 Revolution and the abdication of the Emperor wiped out the existing framework of loyalty, but put nothing solid in its place. This sort of empty radicalism was in line with Western liberalism of the John Stewart Mill variety, people who assumed that social problems arose from the existence of social ties, with detached individuals able to discover their common interests if those oppressive social ties were removed. Of course Western Liberals didn't actually operate as if there were no social ties – they simply supposed that their own pattern of respectable middle-class life was *natural* and that no one would wish to break it. They failed to understand why Chinese with the income to live in a Western style would prefer to go on being Chinese. They would have been equally surprised had they been shown how their own West European descendents would be living in 50 or 100 years time.⁹

To work, a Republic needs a *public*, a human community that has a large stock of fellow-feeling and mutual trust. The British colonies in North America had had that for several generations, having been self-governing under the loose control of the British crown. This enabled them to rule themselves when they won independence. The former Spanish colonies had no such experience, so their politics was utterly unstable and they fragmented after winning independence, with most of the new governments very unstable. China was very much less prepared. Spain shared with the rest of Western Europe a tradition from mediaeval times of legal and limited opposition to your superiors. Chinese political theory believed that there should be a single ruler linked to 'Heaven': a man to whom everyone owed complete loyalty.

All Europeans looked back to the Roman Republic and the limited democracy of Athens as part of their heritage: there is no record of anything remotely similar ever existing in China. But re-establishing the tradition proved tricky. After executing their monarch, the French ran through four Republics, two mutually-hostile monarchies and two Empires before settling down to their current Fifth Republic. That's not counting France's other short-lived arrangement, the Directory, Consulate and the Vichy Republic.

⁹ I saw a lot more about Mill at <http://gwydionwilliams.com/50-new-right-ideas/how-john-stewart-mill-twisted-the-idea-of-liberty/>, including his approval of the Opium Wars and the qualifications he made to his much-quoted phrases about liberty.

China had elections of a sort in 1913, though only rich men had a vote. When this election delivered victory to the Kuomintang, their talented deputy leader Song Jiaoren was assassinated, almost certainly on the orders of General Yuan Shikai. Yuan Shikai then took absolute command the fledgling republic without much difficulty. A country where a politician can murder a rival and carry on without loss of reputation is hardly a country ready for multi-party rule.

It was also a bad time to be trying it: Europe's system of Constitutional Democracy had been badly damaged by the 1914-18 war. This isn't the picture you get given nowadays: the German Empire and Austro-Hungarian Empires are described as autocracies and their defeat as a victory for democracy. But Germany and Austria-Hungary were Constitutional Monarchies in 1914. There and in all of the other major combatants, the war could not have been started without their parliaments voting war credits. The power of the elected representatives was rising everywhere, even in Russia, where there had been a half-constitutional system since 1905.

It is also notable that the norm up to 1914 was Constitutional Monarchy. When Greece, Belgium, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria and Albania became independent states, they all became monarchies, often with the crown going to outsiders. Only after 1918 did it become normal for new states to become Republics. Many of those quickly acquired quasi-monarchical strong-men or dictators, something which modern Political Science finds so baffling that it prefers to ignore it.

Where a newly-created constitutional system was endorsed by a monarch, it was given legitimacy in the eyes of much of the population. (In particular the military and the peasantry, who were likely to be at odds with urban radicals.) It was fairly secure and could gradually change in line with the ambitions of the urban radicals without anything very drastic happening. This was especially true when the monarchy had been there a long time and was part of a grand tradition.

When the various nationalities of the Austro-Hungarian Empires lived within a single political structure, they could get along with each other and be fairly tolerant of minorities, most notably the Jews. But when existing states were carved up at Versailles, something very different emerged. A collection of new states based on nationalities that had mostly not been self-governing since mediaeval times

and which had competitive claims on each other, based on overlapping ethnic groups.

In the wider world, the British Empire was weakened by the war. The USA was strengthened, but failed to do anything coherent with its new power. It preferred the selfish enjoyment of the 1920s and allowed financial speculation that blew up in the Wall Street Crash and then the Great Slump.

Europe between the two World Wars saw a pattern of dictatorships, but I'd see the dictators as more a symptom than a cause. They get judged by analogy with Hitler, who in many ways was the grand exception, the only one of those dictators who wasn't scared to start another major European war. Elsewhere, dictatorship in the 1920s and 1930s looked like a workable solution to the failure of the governments that had allowed the Great War to happen.

Italian Fascism is a case in point. Italy had had a passable stable multi-party democracy before the war, but this had become hopelessly unstable and inefficient. Mussolini's dictatorship was maybe the only alternative to a left-wing revolution, and seen as such by many in Britain. His admirers were not just the marginal characters who were locked up during World War Two. Winston Churchill expressed admiration for Mussolini, while deciding very early that Hitler was a threat.¹⁰ Much-admired writer Hilaire Belloc was also a fan, as you can find in a book called *The Cruise of the "Nona"*. None of this is mentioned in standard accounts, of course. But readers who doubt me should check the original sources.

In Poland, Pilsudski did more than anyone else to establish an independent state, and then tried to hand over to a Western-style parliamentary system. He then decided it was unworkable and overthrew it in a coup in May 1926. Pilsudski as Head of the Armed Forces and sometimes Prime Minister ruled as virtual dictator until his death in 1935. His successor as Head of the Armed Forces, Edward Rydz-mig_y, was functionally the boss when Poland's refusal to compromise with Hitler was the immediate cause of World War Two. A man called Kazimierz Bartel was intermittently Prime Minister but never in charge.

May 1926 also saw the overthrow of the Portuguese First Republic, which had replaced

a constitutional monarchy in 1910, a process which led on to the dictatorship of Salazar. Similar things happened elsewhere, and most of the dictators were passable rulers, not obviously worse or more warlike than the parliamentary systems they had replaced.

This was the background to China trying to find a new constitutional system, having broken with the old after the old refused to change except at a snail's pace.

An Emperor Without Patriotism

Yuan Shikai was a product of the weak modernisation of China's Self-Strengthening period. The Yuan clan were part of the network of gentry armies who had suppressed the Taiping and several other rebellions in the 1850s and 1860s. You could see it as a three-stage process:

- Imperial Warlordism from the defeat of the Taiping to the overthrow of the Empire.
- Early-Republic Warlordism from 1912 till 1927, with frequent changes of government and no clear national leader.
- Late-Republic Warlordism, when the warlord's hopeless mess was partly removed by the Kuomintang-Communist alliance. Chiang Kai-shek was the recognised leader in most of China, but he had cut short the revolutionary-nationalist process. Most warlords remained functionally independent.

Yuan Shikai's career covered the first two parts of Chinese Warlordism's three-stage history. As an infant, he was adopted into the most important branch of the Yuan clan, that of General Yuan Chia-san.¹¹ He sat the traditional Civil Service examination but failed at the first of its three levels and opted for a military career instead. He was sent to Korea, which at that time recognised a loose Chinese overlordship. Japan, having modernised much more successfully, was manoeuvring to take over Korea. Sensibly enough, the majority of Koreans looked to China for support. In 1882, Yuan Shikai was entrusted by the Koreans with training a force of 500 soldiers in modern warfare – or rather modern warfare as China's militarists understood it, but Koreans then would not have known the difference.

Japanese plots and internal Korean politics produced a pro-Japanese coup in 1884. Yuan Shikai led an attack by a mixed Chinese and

¹⁰ <http://gwydionwilliams.com/44-fascism-and-world-war-2/why-churchill-admired-mussolini/>.

¹¹ Ch'en, Jerome, *Yuan Shih-k'ai: 1859-1916. Brutus Assumed the Purple*. Page 14

Korean force on the Japanese soldiers holding the Korean king. The incident ended indecisively, but a treaty the following year saw Japan given equal rights with China in Korea. This reflected China's defeat in the 1884-5 Sino-French War, which separated Annam (Vietnam) from nominal Chinese overlordship and put it under French control.

Yuan continued to play a part in Korean affairs, but was withdrawn by the Chinese government in 1894, just before the First Sino-Japanese War. According to Jerome Ch'en's biography:

"His first serious political lesson was the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95 when he saw the ruination of the ageing Li-Hung-chang [Li Hongzhang] in opposition to a strong foreign power. The lesson was so well driven home to him that, throughout the rest of his life, Yuan never fought against a single foreign soldier – not even during the Boxer Uprising nor when (in 1915) the Japanese presented him with the Twenty-one Demands."¹²

This might seem a very odd lesson to learn – a more normal reaction would have been to try to figure out what Japan had got right, and then copy it. But if it *seems* normal now, that is only because the world has changed a great deal, and our ideas of the normal have shifted with it. As I explained in the previous article, Japan had been able to radically reform on the basis of the Emperor's traditional authority and with the gentry firmly in control. Yuan came from a class of Chinese gentry-warlords who had successfully suppressed their own people in the shape of the Taiping Rebellion, and yet remained scared of them. He and the other warlords preferred to be local tyrants pushed around by foreign powers, but with a privileged position over other Chinese.

War is an inherently collective activity. An army is most deadly and effective when it works like a machine, with officers as the brain-nodes that do the thinking and coordinating at various different levels. The best account of this I know of concerns a warship rather than a land unit. This is a novel called *The Ship* by British author C. S. Forester. Set in the Mediterranean during World War II. It covers a single action by a light-cruiser and maybe says more about real warfare than the heroics of his famous Hornblower novels.

For land warfare, *The Red Badge of Courage* is widely viewed as giving the best

impression of what a modern war feels like to the individual fighter. To coordinate baffled individual fighters and imperfect military officers into a formidable war machine is tricky and feels very unnatural. Arguably it really is unnatural: but it's been repeatedly shown that such war machines win wars against much larger armies where people behave much more like ordinary humans.

(In the 1960s, many of us mistakenly believed that 'guerrilla warfare' was the ideal radical-democratic solution. It *does* allow ordinary people to inconvenience an occupying army, but it has never yet defeated such an army. In Spain, it was Wellington's flexible use of standard regiments of the British Army that defeated the French.¹³ Mao's own military success was correctly described by him as Mobile Warfare, a flexible well-disciplined war-machine shaped by ideology.)

In the early 20th century, the West had the art and science of war-machines well developed, and Japan was able to copy it very efficiently. In China, the various warlord armies copied the externals, but internalising such a system was too alien to their way of thinking.

Yuan and others wanted modernisation in the abstract. But the real price of modernisation was that they should abolish themselves, give up gentry privileges and unite with the common people. Naturally this was too much for most members of the class. It remained the main blockage until the Chinese Communists came to power and shattered gentry power with a massive land-reform.

The defeat by Japan discredited 'Self-Strengthening' as it had been practiced. One answer was more of the same – a bigger army to serve the same corrupt interests:

"What was left of [Li Hongzhang's] Huai Army after the War ...formed the inadequate defensive force of the Imperial Capital and North China. These troops amounted to no more than 70,000 men, with a measure of bloodthirsty bravery but neither training nor discipline, equipped with Mausers and rifles of various makes and calibres. The dire need for a new arm was obvious...

"Apart from the discredited generals of the Huai Army, Yuan was the only one among his contemporaries who had the required experience and

¹² Ibid., p 249

¹³ Surprisingly, the poet Wordsworth wrote one of the first and best descriptions, see <http://gwydionwilliams.com/30-history/the-original-guerillas-of-spain/>

knowledge for the task."¹⁴

This army – also known as the Beiyang Army – came under Yuan's control and was China's best for a long time. That didn't mean that it was good by world standards, just that it was better than its immediate Chinese rivals:

"He took special steps to prevent his officers and men from smoking opium and embezzling funds. Soldiers were paid individually under his personal supervision instead of the money being issued to the commanding officers in the customary way. Discipline was so stern that there were said to be only two ways of noticing subordinates, either by promoting or beheading them."¹⁵

Yuan became the most influential military leader, well-placed to help the 100 Days Reform. Though that reform was a desperate measure, had he backed it and failed it would have been an honourable failure. Instead Yuan opted for gross dishonesty, and yet still failed in the long run.

Yuan had the mentality of a gangster, as indeed did most warlords. He quietly accumulated power within a decaying system. The death of the Dowager Empress and the murder of the Reform Emperor in 1908 resulted in a new government which excluded him, but the new rulers were so ineffective that this did him no harm. As I mentioned, there was a hazy promise of a constitution in 1908: Japan's defeat of Russia in 1905 had been seen by the Chinese elite as the triumph of a constitutional monarchic Japan over autocratic Russia.¹⁶ But while the Manchu elite were willing to dump ancient Chinese traditions, they were not willing to drop Manchu privilege. Han Chinese were the vast majority of the population but remained a minority in the governments in the Empire's last days. The 1911 Revolution happened because the mostly-Han gentry were sick and tired of being kept down. But it was all internal – there was no serious attempt to assert China's rights against foreign powers.

Chinese unity proved fragile. The immediate result of the 1911-12 Revolution was an attempt by several provinces to go their own way. Most of them were large enough to be decent-sized nations in their own right, and had some distinct identity. China could quite easily have fragmented:

"Three provinces – Shensi, Hunan and Kiangsu –

declared independence; and, by the end of the month, this number grew to five. At the end of November, fourteen out of the eighteen provinces in China proper were independent."¹⁷

There was however a strong desire to preserve unity: these declarations of 'independence' seem to have been more a refusal to recognise the legitimacy of the existing government than a real wish to leave 'Zhongguo'. Almost all Chinese (including most of the ethnic minorities) believed strongly that there should be a single sovereign political unit for the whole area of Chinese civilisation and culture, even when they were at odds with the actual government. So a fragile unity was restored, by agreeing to a Republic with Yuan as President.

Yuan consolidated his power, mostly by turning over power in the provinces to military commanders. He concentrated on suppressing the Kuomintang, the most hopeful and dynamic element in China at the time. The notion of becoming a real leader by uniting with such dynamic elements was probably beyond him.

As I said earlier, the Kuomintang won an election despite a narrow franchise. But they had no army, and when one of their main leaders was assassinated, nothing much followed. It was a Republic without a public, no body of ordinary people who would be outraged by such a breach of democratic norms. Norms for politics in Western Europe or the USA were not norms in China in the 1910s, and in fact never became so. The Kuomintang's supporters controlled several provinces. but soon lost a brief civil war.

Yuan then tried to go from being President to Emperor. To achieve this he was willing to concede Japan's notorious *Twenty-One Demands*, which would have put all China under Japanese authority. But this lost him the loyalty of many of his subordinates – what was the use of an authoritarian ruler who was not ready to stand up for his own country? An attempted enthronement in 1916 proved a farce: Yuan faced a much more serious rebellion than had resulted from his suppression of the Kuomintang. His claim to be an Emperor was abandoned by him after 83 days.¹⁸

Despite Yuan's unsuitability, I'd interpret this as the selfish interests of warlords winning

¹⁴ Ibid., p 48-49

¹⁵ Ibid., p 52

¹⁶ Ibid., p 95

¹⁷ Ibid., p 112

¹⁸ Ibid., p 228

out. A revived Empire under a successful military leader might have been effective, and someone more suitable might have been chosen after Yuan's death. But most of the generals preferred weakness in which they could flourish as warlords.

Yuan – still only 56 – died soon after his abandonment of the attempt to be Emperor. Nothing coherent followed. The 'Last Emperor' Puyi was restored in 1917, only to be quickly displaced again. He was later set up as puppet ruler of Manchukuo, the Manchu homeland that Japan had conquered. Japan remained a major threat and the main disruptive force, while almost all of the warlords followed Yuan's example in trying to avoid a fight with external enemies. They preferred to fight other Chinese, battles that the outside powers were willing to let them win.

Contrary to what most historians say, I don't think the idea of a new dynasty was inherently an error. As I mentioned earlier, something similar did produce a viable structure in Iran, where Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1925 overthrew the previous dynasty and became a modernising monarch. That his creation blew up in 1979 under his son may have been due to the 'good advice' of the USA, which has a wretchedly bad record of nation-building among unfamiliar cultures. The idea of a new Chinese dynasty wasn't absurd. The Chinese government at the time did do some serious thinking and noticed that multi-party systems suddenly introduced with no existing traditions led to civil wars and had failed in Latin America. The big trouble was that everybody knew that Yuan had a long history of betrayal and of failing to stand up for Chinese interests.

Autocratic governments only work if they are respected as morally serious by a big chunk of the population. With Yuan, that was always unlikely.

It's one thing to aspire to be China's Ataturk. It's quite another to show yourself quite content to die as a fairly obscure part of the national cause and of your own imperfect war-machine. This was what an obscure Lieutenant-Colonel called Mustafa Kemal did when he faced the forces of the British Empire advancing at Gallipoli and said:

"Men, I am not ordering you to attack. I am ordering you to die. In the time that it takes us to die, other forces and commanders can come and

take our place."¹⁹

He was in the lead: he would have been among the first to die if he'd faced a battle-hardened regiment. As it happened, he faced an Australian force that later became formidable, but at that time was inexperienced and confused.²⁰ So Mustafa Kemal survived and held the line and gained a grand reputation, later being given the very dignified name Ataturk (Father of Turks).

In my view, he was nothing like the military genius that he was later presented as. And as an official report chose to hype him as, to excuse a general failure of the landings, regardless of which general they faced. But there was also a political logic in Turks raising him up far above his immediate subordinates, in order to give him the authority to shape a new state out of the Ottoman ruin. And of course he was a genuine hero, and they all knew it.

Bite-The-Wax-Tadpole Westernisation

The failure of China's Western-style Republic was unsurprising. Chinese reformers had got their ideas about Western politics from political theorists who ignored the mess and brutality of Europe's actual modernisation. Western liberals preached the politics of Cloud Cuckoo Land²¹ and many Chinese mistook this for Western reality. (A tradition that has carried on down to China's 'Charter 08' in our own era.)

It wasn't so much that those Chinese were unrealistic in trying to be like the West. Japan had managed that quite nicely, and without losing touch with their own cultural roots. The Chinese attempt was doomed because its supporters confused the window-dressing with the reality. Because they were trying to be what the West *wasn't*.

The USA was the preferred model, maybe

¹⁹ https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Mustafa_Kemal_Ataturk

²⁰ Peter Hart in his book *Gallipoli* gives a good account of the incident, pages 96-7 of the paperback edition of 2013. (This is not the same person as the Peter Hart noted for having apparently interviewed the dead during research intended to prove that the IRA was sectarian.)

²¹ 'Cloud Cuckoo Land' is an English term for an unrealistically idealistic state where everything is perfect – but also treated as a joke, whereas utopias and paradises are viewed seriously by their believers. It derives from a classical Greek play, *The Birds* by Aristophanes, but has become much better known than its source

because the USA was much less of a colonial power than most of the big European states. But it was absolutely the worst possible model for China to look to, a transplanted society that supposed its complex social forms had sprung up spontaneously. People in the USA expected something similar to happen spontaneously elsewhere, and keep on being genuinely puzzled when this does not happen. Their main success was in Western Europe after World War Two, where it was very much a US-aided re-emergence of forces that had been either in power or struggling as an opposition for a long time. Longer than there had been a United States of America, in many cases, so they were deep-rooted and credible within the society. A totally fresh start was another matter and the US has not been any good at it.

My view of the matter – contrary to most authorities and almost all left-wing writers – is that the key error of the moderates in both China and Russia was to abolish the monarchy, without understanding what a risky and radical move this was. That's not a view that comes naturally to someone from my background: I come from a left-wing family that never took our own monarchy seriously. But looking at history suggests that it was so. If you really do want to turn the whole world upside-down, fine, reject the original foundation of the state apparatus, which had began in Neolithic times as the extended household of the ruler. But turning the whole world upside-down was not at all the intention of the moderate reformists. It was seen as a moderate tidying-up, cleaning up a defect in middle-class or bourgeois values. The same people usually cry out 'IRRATIONAL' when actual social life fails to work according to their theories.

It is notable that Mao tried to work monarchies when it suited him. This included Prince Norodom Sihanouk in Cambodia, an unlikely progressive monarch who was making the best of a bad situation until the US arranged for a coup against him, imagining that this would win them the Vietnam war by destroying a vital Vietcong nerve-centre hidden within Cambodia.²² Less successful for Mao was his attempt to peacefully re-integrate Western Tibet, where the 14th Dalai Lama was

²² COSVN, according to the USA. If it existed, it was never found by them. Plenty of Western experts said at the time that there would be nothing that would be easy to catch.

ruler by supposed reincarnation.²³ This was wrecked by a foolish Tibetan revolt in 1959, by which time Beijing had built roads and an airport and had both easy access and direct links with the slaves and serfs of Traditional Tibet.

Mao was also unexpectedly mild in the case of Puyi, the former Emperor of China. The man had been puppet ruler of Manchukuo under the Japanese: similar collaborators were executed all round the world whenever they were caught. But Puyi was allowed to 'reform', wrote a book praising Mao's China and ended his days quietly as a gardener. Maybe Mao understood the process much better than anyone suspects. There is no hint of it in his writings, as far as I know. But a lot of his actions indicate a much more complex attitude and understanding than are found in his writings, which were always written with the aim of reshaping the world rather than just describing it. Written with the intention of getting Chinese to adapt their thinking to the modern world, or at least Mao's version of it.

To return to the 1910s, the Empire was gone, but the Republic was a total mess. Things had to change – but how? As people lost confidence in Chinese traditions, a whole slew of ideas were imported without much understanding. I'm calling it 'Bite-The-Wax-Tadpole Westernisation', because the arrival of Coca-Cola was one such adaptation:

"You may have heard the story that Coca-Cola translated into Chinese meant 'bite the wax tadpole.' (Some think it's an urban legend.) In fact, it's true, but the translation didn't happen in the way you might think.

"When Coca-Cola was first sold in China in 1927, it was obvious to the Coke employees in China that the Coca-Cola trademark must be transliterated into Chinese characters... there were only about 200 that were pronounced with the sounds the Company needed, and many of these had to be avoided because of their meaning...

"Shopkeepers had also been looking for Chinese equivalents for Coca-Cola, but with strange results. Some had made signs that were absurd, adopting any group of characters that sounded remotely like 'Coca-Cola' -- without giving a thought to the meaning of the characters used. One of these homemade signs sounded like 'Coca-Cola' when pronounced, but the meaning of the characters came out something like 'female horse fastened with wax' and

²³ I've detailed this elsewhere, <http://gwydionwilliams.com/42-china/tibet/the-truth-about-the-dalai-lama/>

another meant 'bite the wax tadpole.'²⁴

Democracy in the shape of Competitive Electoral Politics was not much better understood. It was seen as a formula you could copy, rather than something that grows organically over decades and centuries.²⁵

In Britain, rival political forces had fought a series of civil wars between the 1640s and 1680s, which ended with a Constitutional Monarchy because no one faction had been able to keep control for long. The different elements within Britain had stalemated each other in their 17th century civil wars, and most of them decided that they now had to coexist. The British gentry were in charge, but it was a fairly new gentry, a gentry that knew that the classes just below them were dangerous and must be conciliated.

Britain in the 18th century also had a very rare combination, a gentry that was mostly progressive and a middle class that included many radicals. I suspect that this combination was not just rare but unique: that nothing like it existed before or has existed since. Even in Britain it faded out in the 19th century, with the gentry failing to keep pace with a changing world and becoming increasingly reactionary and futile. But by that time, ideas of democracy and progressive government had spread and become unstoppable.

The British Empire used its power first to destroy that Democratic Authoritarianism of Napoleon and then to undermine the functional reactionary stabilisation sought by the 'Holy Alliance' between Prussia, Russia and Austria. They also encouraged various potential nation-states to rebel against traditional rulers, but stamped on similar processes in their own Empire, repeatedly refusing even Home Rule for Ireland. All of this was short-sighted. The global order it produced was inherently unstable and collapsed under the stresses of the First World War.

In British history after 1688, many of those who'd been Civil War radicals and were excluded from the new political system turned to novel forms of industry. To the gentry, it must have seemed sensible to go along with this. Reactionaries faced the problem of a ruling dynasty that was rather doubtfully legitimate, being chosen only because they had the best claim among Protestants of royal blood. The exiled Stuart dynasty should have been ruling by all of the normal rules, but they were committed to Roman Catholicism. A majority of both the gentry and the ordinary people in England and Lowland Scotland were committed to Protestantism, so they had to bring in a German princely family that was quite distant from the

²⁴ http://www.coca-colaconversations.com/my_weblog/2008/03/bite-the-wax-ta.html

²⁵ I've done a detailed study of this, <http://gwydionwilliams.com/46-globalisation/the-many-versions-of-democracy/>

normal line of descent.

(Wales at that time was far from radical. It became so later on, thanks to a successful growth of popular Protestantism using the Welsh language. Something similar was tried in Ireland, but successfully countered by the underground Roman Catholic priesthood, which in part explains the very different developments that happened later.)

Britain in the 18th century was a society whose ruling class possessed few moral certainties, which meant that the visible creation of wealth by the new industries was too tempting to resist. The resultant industrial society could be viewed as an abomination: the novels of Tobias Smollett and the novels and poems of Oliver Goldsmith show this better than any history book. It was widely believed that this unnatural new system would collapse soon. But the system survived and prospered.

By the early 19th century, Britain's growing power convinced the rest of Europe that it was best to follow suit. Britain's growth in this period was only 1% to 2% per year,²⁶ but that was seen as a staggering success in a world where no one expected a country to be much richer from one century to the next. The rest of Europe watched to see if this British abnormality would collapse, and chose to follow suit when it did not.

But the cost of Britain's new wealth was appalling. You can find a clear account in Engels's, *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*, but Engels was simply seeing more sharply what many others had noticed. Engels originally wrote it in German as *Die Lage der arbeitenden Klasse in England*. An English translation appeared in 1887, by which time some of the worst evils had been cured by state intervention and regulation, so it was made clear that this was a book about life two generations back. In those days it was the Tory Party was the champion of state regulation of the 'Free Market': they still believed in older paternalistic values that included looking after the poor.

What was *really* distinct about Engels and Marx was not the reaction to evils that everyone had noticed, and which did in the longer run get cured. Their key idea was a perception that the new economy was unintentionally undermining the political and cultural system that had produced it. This was an insight that no one had had before. A truth that today's New Right have foolishly chosen to deny or ignore.

Britain's industrialisation was slow by modern standards: its democratisation was slower still. When James the 2nd and 6th was chased out in 1688,²⁷ it was settled that the monarch could not rule without parliament. But it was a parliament of

²⁶ You can find tables of actual growth in Angus Maddison's *The World Economy: Historical Statistics*, OECD 2003.

²⁷ He was 2nd in England but 6th in Scotland

rich men elected by rich men. It took nearly two centuries to expand the electorate to include a majority of adult males living in Britain.²⁸ The Industrial Revolution is commonly dated as starting in 1760 and having being consolidated in the 1830s, which was also when the House of Commons got its first and very limited reform. Before then, a few hundred rich men controlled a majority of seats in the House of Commons, and they were comfortably insulated from the costs of industrial change

It's doubtful if the Industrial Revolution would have been allowed if Britain at the time had been anything like a democracy. There was a lot of popular opposition, but no legal way to stop the spread of factories and the loss of independent small production. And very few Britons wanted another Civil War.

The example of Revolutionary France was closely studied in Britain. Studied with hope in the early stages, when it seemed likely to produce a Constitutional Monarchy similar to the (highly undemocratic) system in Britain. And then with bafflement when it resulted in political chaos and outbreaks of violence and radicalism that most Britons were appalled by. This chaos persuaded most British radicals to stick to slow and safe reformism.

France overthrew a monarch who was trying to be a constitutional ruler. This created a Republic that was unable to stabilise itself. Multi-party democracy produced chaos and weakness and was deservedly abolished in favour of Napoleon's autocratic rule, initially as First Consul and later as Emperor. A second Republic was established in 1848, and was overthrown in 1852. Overthrown by Napoleon the Third, who had been elected its first President and was unreasonably refused a chance to run for a second term, and so grabbed power and made himself Emperor with majority approval. The Third Republic established after France's defeat by Prussia in 1870 lasted till 1940 but was never much respected. Nor was the Fourth Republic much better: it had a pattern of weak governments. De Gaulle established his own authoritarian rule within the Fifth Republic, but chose to keep democracy in being. De Gaulle created a system that has worked passably well, despite coming close to being overthrown by student rebels in 1968. He oversaw France's transition to a modern nation with functional multi-party democracy. He was the most recent and probably the last of a chain of charismatic authoritarians who transformed France after its original politics broke down.

An industrial society is complex and artificial, not natural. So too is a political system that can allow limited quarrels between rival parties and that can also deliver good government. Unstable republics alternating with authoritarian rule has

been the modern human norm, not the exception. You find little else when a Republic has to be established without prior traditions of self-rule. The USA worked because the states had been self-governing within the British Empire, but still had a Civil War of astonishing bitterness and cost in lives in the 1860s. And it was dominated in the first crucial decades by the Federalist Party, George Washington's party.

If you look for successful examples of modernisation, you find a limited number of patterns:

- a) A system growing in partnership with traditional rulers who were willing to become constitutional. This happened in Japan and was happening in Germany, Austria-Hungary and even Tsarist Russia up until World War One. Something similar is happening in Thailand, Jordan and Morocco – perhaps now falling apart in Thailand. It could happen in the Gulf States, though this is more doubtful.

It was also happening in the Ottoman Empire, where the Young Turks deposed a Sultan but then installed his brother as a figurehead.

- b) A nationalist-authoritarian system. Turkey is the most notable and successful example, managing to transform itself into a multi-party system after the main changes were complete. Egypt and Algeria are nationalist-authoritarian, with the West making little noise about it because democratisation would be likely to favour Islamists. Iraq was also developing under such a system with Saddam, and the US destroyed it. Learning nothing and forgetting nothing, they have since helped inflict the same chaos upon Syria and Libya
- c) A colony ruled by a power with elections at home manages to acquire something similar for itself, usually after a period of partial self-government in which effective politicians and parties can develop. Prime examples are the USA and the Republic of India. But a lot of Britain's other ex-colonies that were not dominated by British settlers have failed to make it work.

I'd say that the trouble in China after the 1911-12 revolution was the lack of a suitable authoritarian figure who might have consolidated the system, after the Manchu Dynasty exhausted its credit by dithering on reform. Yuan Shikai was not very plausible, as I explained earlier. But by being the best-placed candidate, he helped block the emergence of some other general who might have played the Ataturk role. Dowager Empress Cixi and General Yuan Shikai were a pair of political cuckoos, skilled at ousting rivals from the governmental nest but incapable of doing anything useful during their periods of dominance.

Yuan while he ruled was the sort of 'Strong

²⁸ <http://gwydionwilliams.com/40-britain/665-2/>

Man' wanted by the West. What this meant was someone strong enough to bully his own people and weak enough so that he would mostly obey foreign wishes. Someone who would force his own people to accept an 'Open Legs' policy for the benefit of foreigners. Most of the other warlords were not obviously better, and they were faced with a fragmented country where anyone who got too strong was likely to be pulled down by a brief coalition of their rivals.

The politics of the Blue Republic was probably no worse or more corrupt than that of the Yellow Empire, the traditional Chinese system. But the world had changed, and they were failing to change with it.

In some ways, the era of warlords resembled the Yellow Empire when there was no agreed dynasty to be the focus of loyalty. But the Yellow Empire had also had a more sophisticated material culture and a more sophisticated system of commerce than Britain and the rest of Western Europe when the British industrial revolution happened. And the culture of the Yellow Empire was also there to maintain a single way of life that was centuries old – that was supposed to be continuous back to the Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties that Confucius had used as models. Its entire traditional culture had evolved to stop changes of the sort that China now was obliged to make.

China's 'Blue Republic' lasted from 1912 to 1949, and achieved nothing. Small gains were made in the coastal industry that had grown up under Western influence. Their main achievement was to build roads, which suited Global Imperialism because it opened up even more of China to exploitation. Some of the 'unequal treaties' were eased. But there's no particular reason to think that a continuation of Imperial China would have done any worse. It might well have done better, since the West would not have seen it as dangerously radical. In substance, the Blue Republic was a time-waster. With a longer life for Sun Yatsen it might have been very different, but even that is speculative.

(Sun had admirable intentions. But he made the key error of working with organisations that had originally been created to oppose the Manchu invaders, but had largely degenerated into gangsterism. This was very different from the Chinese Communists, which began as party consisting mostly of intellectuals from privileged and law-abiding backgrounds. And which evolved after defeat and persecution into a tough organisation that could take in people from many different sources, including bandits and turn them into dedicated radicals and Red Warriors.)

After the Russian Revolution, the new Soviet government gained some credit in China by renouncing the privileges within China that the Tsars had acquired over the decades. It wasn't that idealistic a policy: they hung onto Tsarist

territorial gains and even helped pro-Soviet Mongols take over what had been Outer Mongolia and became the Mongolian Republic. But the new Soviet Union was admired when it was seen that a revolution begun in 1917 had produced a coherent and unified government by 1922, after winning its Civil War in the face of deep hostility from global imperialism. The Soviet Union was seen as an example worth copying by many Chinese, frustrated by a lack of achievement from their 1911-12 revolution.

In line with Lenin's policy, the Comintern formed an alliance with Sun Yatsen and the Kuomintang, restructuring the party on Leninist lines and establishing the Whampoa Military Academy to train a new set of military officers with a more professional outlook.

To lead Whampoa, the Comintern chose Chiang Kai-shek. This fateful decision elevated a gifted but morally dubious character to a position where he became China's third cuckoo, occupying the political niche where a more substantial non-Communist national leader might otherwise have emerged.

Shanghai Jack

Chiang Kai-shek was not the man to be China's Ataturk, any more than Yuan Shikai was.²⁹ He'd gone to Japan to get a military education, but then had nowhere suitable to apply it for many years. Meantime he'd got involved with Shanghai's Green Gang, a vast criminal organisation that was intertwined with the Shanghai police and was subordinate to foreign interests. No doubt this connection was very useful to Chiang after he shot dead a major political rival:

"After the takeover of the Republican government by Yuan Shikai and the failed Second Revolution, Chiang, like his Kuomintang comrades, divided his time between exile in Japan and havens in Shanghai's foreign concession areas. In Shanghai, Chiang also cultivated ties with the underworld gangs dominated by the notorious Green Gang and its leader Du Yuesheng. On 15 February 1912 a few KMT members, including Chiang, killed Tao Chengzhang, the leader of the Restoration Society, in a Shanghai French Concession hospital, thus ridding Sun Yat-sen of his chief rival. (There is no evidence that Sun Yat-sen himself was involved in the affair in any way.)"³⁰

The gangster world is also known as the Underworld, and is dependent on the ordinary world for its existence. It is mostly parasitic, and also incapable of being more than an underground shadow of normal existence. It was no place for a future national leader to develop, but this was where Chiang chose to be:

²⁹ The name 'Shanghai Jack' wasn't ever applied to him, as far as I know, except humorously in the Hyman Kaplan novels. But it stuck in my memory and I find it very fitting.

³⁰ <http://history.cultural-china.com/en/46H7126H12367.html>

"Chiang had numerous brushes with the law during this period and the International Concession police records show an arrest warrant for him for armed robbery. On February 15, 1912, Chiang Kai-shek shot and killed Tao Chengzhang, the leader of the Restoration Society, at point-blank range as Tao lay sick in a Shanghai French Concession hospital, thus ridding Chen Qimei of his chief rival. In 1915, Chen Qimei was assassinated by agents of Yuan Shikai and Chiang succeeded him as the leader of the Chinese Revolutionary Party in Shanghai. This was during a low point in Sun Yat-sen's career, with most of his old Revolutionary Alliance comrades refusing to join him in the exiled Chinese Revolutionary Party, and Chen Qimei had been Sun's chief lieutenant in the party."³¹

According to Fenby's *Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek and the China He Lost*:

"Returning to Shanghai with his first victory under his belt, Chiang was put in command of a revolutionary army brigade funded by local merchants. According to a critical account written in 1930, the men were riff-raff, and their commander soon gave up trying to train them. Chiang followed the example of Chen Qimei [*his mentor in Chinese revolutionary nationalism*] by forging links with secret societies, and plunged into the flamboyant Shanghai nightlife.. He also got to know Zhang Jinqiang, a prominent finance whom he added to his list of sworn brothers...

"After meeting Sun Yat-sen on a boat, Zhang became a devoted follower of the doctor, and contributed large sums to his cause...

"With his dark glasses, Richard-III-like appearance and aura of money and power, he [Zhang] was one of the city's distinctive figures, his influence increased by the underworld and secret society contacts to whom he introduced Chiang. The young revolutionary clearly struck Zhang as a man with a future. For his part, Chiang referred to his feeling of 'fear and respect' for the businessman.

"Despite such useful associations, Chiang was not the most popular man in revolutionary circles. He had a nasty temper and insisted on having his own way. His fiery side was well illustrated when he wanted to see a rival of Chen Qimei, who was in hospital at the time. As a quarrel developed, Chiang pulled out a pistol and shot the man dead.

"[Footnote] According to the adulatory biography by Sie, Chiang acted in 'legitimate self defence'... but others say he took the initiative.

"After this episode Chiang, now twenty-five, took off for Japan, where he published a military magazine, for which he wrote articles extolling the doctrine of 'blood and iron' and the centralisation of military power. China, he argued, should be ruled by an enlightened despotism, which would combine 'Washington's ideas' with 'Napoleon's methods', and democratic thought with revolutionary spirit."³²

³¹

<http://www.ibiblio.org/chinesehistory/contents/06dat/bio.3rep.html>

³² Fenby, Jonathan. *Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek and the China He Lost*, Free Press 2003. Pages 33-34

This is another example of how alien Chinese politics were at the time: no one seemed bothered that Chiang had killed a political rival, or that it might have been deliberate murder. You couldn't imagine British Tory leader David Cameron gunning down Ed Miliband or Nigel Farage. Nor Barak Obama 'wasting' a few Republican senators in order to secure a legislative majority. But in China's brief attempt at a Parliamentary Democracy, similar things happened without much comment or concern.

Some military-authoritarian leader might have modernised China in a broadly Western and right-wing manner, as Atatürk did in Turkey. But the two best-placed men, Yuan and Chiang, were hopelessly inadequate. Both had dirty pasts that were well-known to everyone they did business with. Both proved hopelessly weak in the face of foreign threats. Both acted as cuckoos in the nest, blocking other possible developments.

You need only look back to the choices that Chiang made to see how unsuitable he was. He found himself in command of a unit of riff-raff, so he gave up on them, preferring to make profitable connections with opium gangsters. A more serious man would have turned his troops into something other than riff-raff, or else died trying. A lot of the new recruits to Mao's Red Army came from the warlord armies and would have been riff-raff when they arrived, followers of the ancient Chinese habit of defeated soldiers joining the winning side. But they became something very different thanks to the simplistic but highly effective political training that Mao helped develop.

The Kuomintang had become much more serious when the Soviet Union remodelled it as a Leninist-type party. This included having Chiang Kai-shek appointed Commandant of the Whampoa Military Academy, which trained officers for an army that was given elements of Leninist discipline and was the best Chinese army until the Red Army emerged. Chiang did nothing much to build on this heritage: he was always a wastrel. When the Northern Expedition got as far as Shanghai, he and his gangster allies massacred the Chinese Communists and suppressed radicalism within the Kuomintang. They became a new government, but it was largely 'business as usual'.

The British Empire squatted in Shanghai and along the Yangtze Valley as a broadly obstructive force. Britain's imperial governing class had by the 20th century ceased to do anything useful in the Indian Subcontinent, which was more than ready to be ruled by an elite of Hindus and Muslims who'd had British education. In China, the British community was never anything more than a gigantic parasite on a society they'd wilfully disrupted to open it up for trade. A few individuals did good work, most notably Joseph Needham. But the bulk of Britons in China were narrow-minded fools who were hostile to any attempt by the Chinese to remake their own society.

Had Britain added Western Tibet to British India, they might have overseen a traditionalist modernisation there and done some good. But Tibet was not a likely source of large revenues, so Lhasa's various attempts to claim independence under British protection were not supported. Shanghai was much more valuable to the British Empire, with gigantic opium sales continuing to the bitter end. British India made a lot of money growing opium, regardless of the limited legal outlets for this crop. China was the main actual outlet even before the Opium Wars, and successive British governments chose to keep this corrupt relationship in place.

(Nor were such links a source of shame, of the sort that Britain's rulers sometimes demands from foreign countries. There was an official Opium Department within the Government of India, which was seen as a respectable government job. One of these respectable employees was the father of George Orwell (Eric Blair), as I've described elsewhere.³³ Orwell misleadingly described his father as being 'a colonial Civil servant', at a time when opium was no longer respectable. But the broad business relationships survived surprisingly well. A lot of the opium money would have been deposited with the *Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation*, which was founded after the First Opium War. It survived in Hong Kong during Mao's rule, and became a major presence in Britain after taking over the Midland Bank. As HSBC, it is currently the world's second-biggest privately-owned company.)³⁴

The British Empire in Shanghai, the Yangtze Valley and the rest of China was doing very nicely out of Chinese misery, and was not going to quit without a fight. Developments in China in the 1920s gave the Kuomintang a simple choice between fighting global imperialism or becoming lackeys. Chiang Kai-shek and his Green Gang friends showed no qualms about becoming lackeys: maybe they planned to become something more later on, but this was never likely.

A successful authoritarian state may make use of criminals, but it cannot be run by them. The Nazi leaders were all from highly law-abiding backgrounds: right-wing criminals within the Nazi Party took orders from them and knew their place.

(This also applies to Leninism. Some people including novelist Michael Moorcock get muddled about Stalin's brief involvement with professional crime. He organised some successful bank robberies in the lean period after the 1905 Revolution, when the Bolshevik Party needed funds. But this was incidental to his main work as a Professional Revolutionary. He had the right type

of personality to control the weaker sort of gangster, but this was a sideline within his main career as a radical politician. In Republican China it was all much more ambiguous, with no clear lines between warlordism, criminal networks and the Kuomintang. It rotted whatever genuine political idealism might have existed among them.)

Meantime a Chinese Communist Party had formed, or rather it had emerged twice, in China itself and separately among Chinese working in Europe. Global Leninism encouraged the formation of a Chinese Communist Party, but then switched to updating the Kuomintang, in line with Comintern policy. But in China in that era, where there was no clear line between politics and warfare, this was not an arrangement that was likely to work. The policy was a bungle. Either they should have ordered the Chinese Communists to wholly dissolve themselves into the Kuomintang, or they should have ignored the Kuomintang and helped the Communists to build their own armies. Attempting to carry through a national revolution with two rival power-centres was always likely to lead to disaster.

On the other hand, that is seeing it with the benefit of hindsight. Comintern guidance was imperfect, obviously. What gets overlooked is that *Moscow's efforts successfully produced the only two successful governing parties in China, a society that had been incapable of doing this for itself*. China had not benefited much from Western guidance, including vast but futile efforts by the USA, which believed that indirect control of China was the key to the future. Nothing much came of US efforts: only the Soviet input took root and spread. And the Kuomintang made no further progress after breaking with the Soviet Union and the ideal of radical democratic revolution. It had united most of South China but never had much of a grip on North China, nor West China until it moved there after being pushed out of its main power-centres by the Japanese invasion.

Some of the Kuomintang leaders were Christians. Christianity in China was hampered by its missionaries accepting privileges as foreigners that were part of a package of national humiliation. Anarchism briefly flourished in China before Leninism arrived: anarchism is a creed that flourishes best in old-fashioned autocracies that are badly in need of a dose of anarchy. But everywhere where this has happened, an actual dose of anarchy reminds most people of the usefulness of the state. That's why anarchism has never been a particularly serious movement.

Marxism was known to some Chinese intellectuals before the Comintern's agents got to work, but it seems to have been 'Legal Marxism', the Marxist mainstream before the rise of Leninism. This was a creed that was well-suited to the long peace in Europe leading up to 1914. A movement which had no idea what to do when the world changed utterly with the vast disruption of World War One, and faded into insignificance.

³³ <http://gwydionwilliams.com/44-fascism-and-world-war-2/45-1-more-on-fascism-the-world-wars/491-2/>

³⁴ http://www.forbes.com/lists/2008/18/biz_2000global08_The-Global-2000_Rank.html. 'Hongkong' is an older spelling of Hong Kong and retained by the bank

In China, the Comintern supported Revolutionary Nationalism and supposed that Communism would only be possible many decades in the future, after the 'Bourgeois Revolution' had done its work. But that assumed the existence of a middle-class with the right mindset, as well as the guts to be radical and take on powerful foreign foes. The vast majority of the Chinese middle classes were only concerned with their own kind, mostly their own extended families. In the countryside, there was no feudal aristocracy to confront. Successful farmers moved easily into a class of landlords that had traditionally been the main source of the ruling scholar-gentry, and who were also the main source of the warlords and their officers. The middle class was already broadly in control and had nothing much to gain from revolution, nothing except freedom from foreign domination. Yet this domination had been successfully asserted several times and they were mostly scared to try another revolt against this indirect rule by foreign masters. Scared also of the broad mass of Chinese under them, people who were likely to want to equalise the society.

At Shanghai, Chiang faced a city of 600,000 in which ordinary people had asserted themselves in a broadly democratic manner. They had taken over and welcomed him as a liberator. This was something new in Chinese history: even the Taiping had been grouped around a charismatic leader possessing the same sort of religious authority as a traditional Emperor ('Son of Heaven'). A stronger leader would not have been bothered by the large Communist element in the leadership: the mass of the population was still amorphous and open to shaping. Chiang preferred to organised mass slaughter of the radicals using Shanghai's huge underworld. He then made a deal with Western Imperialism in which he assured them that nothing much would change. The Kuomintang's main achievement was building a lot of new roads, which suited the imperialists because it opened up even more of China to their power.

Mao's well-known remark about political power growing out of the barrel of a gun was a simple fact of life in China after the Imperial Government was overthrown. No politics had much significance unless it was backed by armed force. The only likely cure for China's weakness was a unified army under the control of a leader strong enough to reshape the nation.

Chiang Kai-shek tried to become that man and he failed. At no time was Chiang Kai-shek ever in full control of China. Most of the warlords found it convenient to recognise him as the national leader, but that was a long way short of accepting him as Top Man in the way Mustafa Kemal was raised up in Turkey and officially given the unique surname Ataturk, 'Father of Turks'.³⁵ Chiang was never so

powerful or so respected. He presumably kept the capital of China in Nanjing because he dare not try to rule from Beijing, surrounded as it was by the fragments of what had been Yuan Shikai's Beiyang Army. Instead he tried to change the city's name from Beijing – Northern Capital – to Beiping, Northern Peace. This never really caught on outside of the Kuomintang government's official documents, but the USA kept on using it into the 1960s, mostly in the older version 'Peiping'.

The problem with Chiang Kai-shek was not that he was a dictator: no other sort of government was likely to work in China as it then was. Sun Yatsen had officially set out that there would be a period of 'tutelage' before eventually moving to a multi-party Western system. But Sun Yatsen had realised that there also had to be radical change and had wanted a serious land reform. Chiang Kai-shek preferred to support the existing order, a parasitic landlord class that separated itself from physical labour as soon as it could, and mostly did nothing useful. It's true that there were few large landlords, but there were even fewer who did anything productive.

Chiang got a limpet-like grip on power, but part of the deal was that he rejected urgently needed changes, particularly land reform. He was also ready to give away chunks of China to Japan, in the hope that outside powers would rescue him in the longer term.

Warlord Alternatives

I called Chiang a cuckoo, someone who occupied the spot in which an effective non-Communist leader might have emerged. But it's moot if there was anyone much better – someone with the right political skills and an army to make it meaningful. The best candidate I could find among the warlords was Feng Yuxiang (Feng Yu-hsiang), also known as the Christian General. Unlike Chiang, who officially became a Methodist in order to marry into the Soong family, Feng's conversion to Christianity was sincere and was reflected in his style of leadership. As one British Christian commentator put it:

"The contrast between Cromwell's Ironsides and Charles's Cavaliers is not more striking than that which exists in China today between the godly and well-disciplined troops of General Feng and the normal type of man who in that land goes by the name of soldier... While it is too much to say that there are no good soldiers in China outside of General Feng's army, it is none the less true that the people generally are as fearful of the presence of troops as of brigand bands. The brigands, indeed, are generally unpaid or disbanded troops, being today in the regular army and tomorrow freebooters."³⁶

That was in 1923, at a time when English Protestants took their own history seriously and

³⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mustafa_Kemal_Ataturk#Personal_life as at 21st May 2015

³⁶ Broomhall, Marshall. *General Feng: A Good Soldier of Christ Jesus*, by the Religious Tract Society, London 1923. Page 1.

mostly regarded Cromwell as an admirable example. In the West, Feng gets remembered now for supposedly baptising his troops with a hosepipe. The matter is not mentioned in his biographies and I really don't believe it. Not all of his men were Christians, and the process of conversion seems to have been taken very seriously.

Feng was initially praised by some foreign observers, but did not get substantial support. Most Westerners continued with the policy that Britain had initiated after the Opium Wars – keep China nominally independent but weak. Feng later offended the West by being willing to look to the Soviet Union for support, and for working with the Chinese Communists.

Feng built his own traditions from the ground up: Chiang hijacked the reformed Kuomintang when it had been rebuilt with Communist help. Chiang then made an alliance with Feng against other Northern warlords, followed inevitably by a further war between the two of them. This ended with Chiang defeated Feng and became Top Warlord in a country that remained badly divided.

Whether Feng would have done any better had he defeated Chiang is one of history's unknowns. One point to note is that if he had won out, he might have gone further than either Chiang or Mao in reviving historic claims. Talking of Feng's political education of his men, Broomhall explains:

"Every room had a map of China as she was some one hundred years ago, and before her territories had been encroached on by foreign nations. Those portions of the Empire which had been lost, e.g. Korea, Formosa [Taiwan], French Indo-China, etc., were coloured a vivid crimson."³⁷

Korea and French Indo-China had never actually been governed by the China's final dynasties, the Ming and Manchu. They had just recognised a general overlordship, without anything like the Amban system that the Manchu rulers applied in Tibet, Mongolia and what's now Xinjiang. Whether Feng would have accepted that had he become China's ruler is another unknown.

If Chiang Kai-shek was the wrong man in the right position, General Feng was maybe the right man in the wrong position. He was a warlord with no strong body of politically influential followers. If he'd defeated Chiang, that might just have continued the chaos of the failed Republic. Only if he had become leader of the Kuomintang would he maybe have had a chance. But the Left Kuomintang seemed to have viewed him with suspicion. Feng had originally been a follower of General Yuan Shikai and remained part of the Beiyang or 'North Ocean' faction that had competed for control of Beijing from Yuan Shikai's death in 1916 to Chiang's emergence in the south in 1927.

By 1948, Feng had aligned himself with the Chinese Communists, but died in a mysterious fire on board a Soviet ship on the Black Sea.

Chiang remained mostly a leader in the South and could never trust the northern warlords – he seems to have somehow forgotten this in 1936 when he paid a flying visit to the power-centre of two of them and got imprisoned for failing to protect Chinese territory against the Japanese; that was the famous Xian Incident. The various northern warlords later made their own deals with the advancing Communists in the late 1940s, though only after the Communists had beaten Chiang's best troops in Manchuria. The loyal core who fled with Chiang to Taiwan were mostly those he had helped train at the Whampoa Military Academy.

(In Chinese culture, a teacher has almost the same status as a parent, unlike the West where most people only recognise links to teachers they happen to admire, or perhaps to none of them. This same link was useful to Zhou Enlai, who also had the status of 'teacher' to many enemy generals from his time as head of Whampoa's Political Department, as I will detail in future articles.)

The Blue Republic was born with a North-South split which was never entirely healed. Only the Chinese Communists managed to bridge that particular gap. I'd suppose it was this north-south gap that made it unlikely that the Left Kuomintang could view Feng as an ally. Feng was less anti-Communist than Chiang, but that doesn't mean he was actually more modern. He was maybe less so: Chiang had been to the Soviet Union and seen what that particular future meant. Perhaps Feng always thought in warlord terms, willing to ally with anyone against anyone else. He *did* attempt some serious resistance to the Japanese incursions, but was unable to build a national movement around himself.

The other warlords of the period look even less promising than General Feng. Most of them tried to run an independent realm, while not seeking formal separatism. Yunnan was functionally an independent country for most of the period of the Blue Republic. Its ruler from 1927 to 1945 was Long Yun, 'Cloud Dragon'. He is generally viewed as corrupt but also patriotic, which would make him above-average for Chinese warlords..³⁸ Occupying the Chinese end of the 'Burma Road' during the Japanese invasion, he did make a serious effort to contribute to the global war effort. His entry at the Wikipedia describes how his reward was to be violently deposed in 1945 by troops loyal to China Kai-shek while his own best forces were elsewhere. He was given a gimcrack government position well away from his power base, but in 1949 switched to supporting the Chinese Communists. He got back a little of his power, but fell again during the 1950s

³⁷ Ibid., pages 66-67

³⁸ <http://www.amazon.com/Oral-History-Yunnan-Chinese-Edition/dp/7510810477>,
http://pwencycl.kgbudge.com/L/u/Lung_Yun.htm

anti-Rightist movement. He died in 1962 and was rehabilitated as a patriot in 1980. This fascinating character's life could make an excellent popular history for Western readers: none exists, as far as I know.

Things were even more complex in Manchuria, the homeland of the Manchu invaders. It had been opened up to Han settlement in the mid-19th century, having previously been kept closed as the sacred homeland of the ruling minority. The policy was changed when Tsarist Russia put on pressure and did take some territories known as 'Outer Manchuria'. (Territories that were inherited by Soviet Russia and are accepted as part of today's Russian Republic.) Within 'Inner Manchuria', Han settlers poured in to take advantage of good agricultural land. Ethnic Manchu had become a minority. After the fall of the Manchu dynasty, most of Manchuria was taken over by the warlord Zhang Zuolin [Chang Tso-lin]. He ran it as a separate entity, but also aspired to be ruler of all China and was at times in control of the nominal Central Government in Beijing. When the Japanese arranged for his assassination in 1928, he was succeeded by his son Zhang Xueliang [Chang Hsüeh-liang], who however was pushed out in 1931 by the Japanese, who set up Manchukuo the following year. Manchukuo was recognised as an independent state by quite a few countries in the

1930s and 1940s, though it was actually a Japanese puppet.

Zhang Xueliang and the exiled Manchurian army he led played a major role in the Xian Incident, in which Chiang Kai-shek was arrested and forced to agree to a United Front with the Communists against Japan. This proved to be the Communist's path to power: they emerged from the war with much better nationalist credentials than Chiang and the Kuomintang.

I'll detail in a future article how Chiang Kai-shek's branch of the Kuomintang functioned briefly as genuine nationalists during the start of the Japanese Invasion. But after the Japanese attacked the USA, they seemed to have assumed that the USA would do the main work and relaxed their efforts. This got them despised by most US citizens who saw them up close, most of these not at all left-wing or sympathetic to Communism. But contrary to the myths spread in the hysteric anti-Communist campaign later blamed on Joseph McCarthy, Chiang received continuous and massive aid from the USA until his regime collapsed completely. He failed because the Chinese Communists were much better nationalists and modernisers, as I will detail in the next articles.

Stalin: Paradoxes of Power

Stephen Kotkin' Stalin: Paradoxes of Power, 1878-1928 (volume 1). Penguin, 2014 (Kindle edition)

Reviewed by Mark Cowling

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This magazine is committed to democratic socialism, so that a review of a book about Stalin perhaps requires some explanation. The Soviet Union was for a long time regarded as the first and most important example of a working model of socialism. And Stalin, who emerged as the dictator of the Soviet Union by 1928 was obviously central to the form of society which emerged. So, though Labour Affairs generally looks at societies which combine liberal democracy with socialism as possible models, a substantial book with insights into the Soviet version of socialism is of interest.

In a review of a book of 920 pages, itself the first volume of a trilogy, it is necessary to be selective. My assumption is that the reader has some familiarity with the history of the Soviet Union, so that the review can focus on specifically interesting ideas and conclusions in Kotkin's book.

Background observations.

The book contains a variety of sweeping and broad brush historical observations which vary between fascinating and irritating. For example, comparing the czarist empire to the United States he points out that the largest

concentration of capital in the United States before the Civil War was the slaves in the Southern States. He points out that Stolypin's attempt to pursue grandiose projects such as opening new territories and building railways and canals had parallels in state-directed development in other countries. He makes graphically clear the extreme disregard of human life among the elite of the leading capitalist countries. In dealing with a revolt in German South West Africa (1905-7) the Germans wiped out 75% of the population. Belgium, the violation of whose sovereignty by the Germans, was, of course, the immediate ostensible reason for Britain's entry to the First World War, had killed, mutilated or enslaved about half the population of the Congo, some 10 million people, in the pursuit of rubber, diamonds and gold. Kotkin points out that the attitudes of the British elite during the First World War were consistent with this disregard of human suffering. He quotes General Haig as follows:

"The British commander at the Somme, General Sir Douglas Haig, demonstrated no concern for human life, neither the enemy's nor that of his own men. 'Three years of war and the loss of one-tenth of the manhood of the nation is not too great a price to pay in so great a cause,' Haig wrote in his diary. When British casualties were too low, the general saw a sign of loss of will. Of the 3.6 million men under arms in 1914 in democratic France—the only republic among the great powers— fewer than 1 million remained by 1917. Some 2.7 million had been killed, wounded, taken prisoner, or gone missing. Civilians died en masse, too. No large European city was laid waste— mostly, the Great War was fought in villages and fields— but state 'security' now meant the destruction of the enemy culturally, as the Germans had demonstrated from the outset in Belgium: libraries, cathedrals, and the civilians who embodied the enemy nation were made targets of bombing and deliberate starvation."

In its early years the Soviet Union was notoriously bedevilled by the problem that industrial goods were too expensive to encourage the peasantry to voluntarily sell grain to the state, a problem which – to anticipate – Stalin attempts to solve by collectivisation in 1928, dealt with briefly at the end of the book. However, Kotkin makes it clear that this was also a wartime problem for the czarist regime:

"Nor was the problem primarily the transportation system, which nearly everyone scapegoated. True, the rail network was not organized to circulate grain to markets within the empire. More fundamentally, however, many peasants refused to sell their grain to the state because the prices were low, while prices for

industrial goods peasants needed (like scythes) had skyrocketed. Perhaps even more fundamentally, wartime state controls, driven by a deep anticommercial animus, had squeezed out the maligned but essential middlemen (petty grain traders), and failed to serve as an adequate substitute, thereby disorganizing domestic grain markets."

The context is different, but this has a striking similarity to what Trotsky described as the scissors crisis.

Kotkin points out that at the time of the February 1917 Revolution the vast mass of Russians regarded themselves as socialists. This obviously did not mean that the Bolsheviks were destined to succeed in the October Revolution, but it was certainly a very helpful factor.

Perhaps linked to this is the low esteem in which constitutional democracy was held by virtually all Russian elites. Kotkin points out dramatically just how limited was Russian democracy and the czarist regime. The first Duma of 1906 following the failed revolution of 1905 was tolerated for 73 days before being dissolved. The next year the second Duma was tolerated for 90 days, and then the Third Duma was more compliant being based on an extremely narrow electoral franchise. The czar was plainly not taking electoral democracy seriously – indeed, he believed that it was his divinely ordained obligation to maintain the autocracy. Moreover, the succession leaderships which follow the February 1917 Revolution, and which were officially committed to liberal democracy, stalled when it came to arranging for the election of a Constitutional Assembly.

Stalin's early years.

Turning specifically to features of Stalin's biography, Trotsky is well-known for disparaging Stalin's ignorance of foreign languages, which suggests provincial narrowness and back of ability, but Kotkin points out that actually apart from his native Georgian:

"[The] future Stalin picked up colloquial Armenian. He also dabbled in Esperanto (the constructed internationalist language), studied but never mastered German (the native tongue of the left), and tackled Plato in Greek. Above all, he became fluent in the imperial language: Russian."

Thus Stalin was functioning for most of his adult life in what started out as a foreign language.

Much tends to be made of the influence of Stalin's early life on his subsequent behaviour

– for example, he was beaten by his mother and father and therefore regarded physical violence to other people as acceptable. Or, because he was a Georgian and Georgians engaged in blood feuds Stalin found it natural to persecute his enemies. Kotkin points out that other Georgians with similar backgrounds did not grow up in the same pattern. Instead he sensibly attributes Stalin's tendency to feel persecuted and his emphasis on dealing ruthlessly with class enemies and traitors to the Leninist ideology which sees society as based on class struggle and the supreme value as the defeat of class enemies so that a new society can be constructed. This is helpful in that it makes a start on distinguishing between things which would probably have happened in the Soviet Union anyway, and things which are specifically attributable to Stalin himself.

Stalin tends to be seen (largely accurately) as a loyal Bolshevik follower of Lenin, but was certainly capable of independent thought. Kotkin points out that at the fourth Congress of the RSDLP, held in Stockholm in 1906, Lenin favoured land nationalisation, the Mensheviks favoured land municipalisation, but Stalin advocated simply distributing the land to the peasants with a view to reducing the attraction of the Socialist Revolutionaries, the party which spoke for the interests of the majority of the peasantry. This was, of course, the policy which the Bolsheviks actually carried out in 1917.

Around this time Stalin was a Bolshevik organiser in Baku in the Caucasus. Kotkin makes it clear that conditions in the chemical industry there were appalling, with very long days and that living conditions. Stalin had a justifiably wild reputation from that time. Apart from organising at least one spectacular bank raid:

"Jughashvili's [this was Stalin's family name – he adopted 'Stalin' or man of steel as a pen name] Baku exploits included not just propagandizing and political organizing, but also hostage taking for ransom, protection rackets, piracy, and, perhaps, ordering a few assassinations of suspected provocateurs and turncoats. How distinctive was he in this regard? Even by the wild standards of the 1905–8 Russian empire, political murder in the Caucasus was extraordinary."

Stalin and the October Revolution.

I am now skipping Kotkin's description of years of underground work, imprisoned and exile, and turning to the October Revolution. Stalin was not, of course, initially in favour of

attempting a socialist revolution, and needed to be persuaded, like many other Bolsheviks by Lenin. Trotsky maintained that Stalin's role in the Bolshevik coup was negligible, but Kotkin is definite that the contrary is true:

"..wrong. Stalin was deeply engaged in all deliberations and actions in the innermost circle of the Bolshevik leadership, and, as the coup neared and then took place, he was observed in the thick of events. 'I had never seen him in such a state before!' recalled David Sagirashvili (b. 1887), a fellow Social Democrat from Georgia. 'Such haste and feverish work was very unusual for him, for normally he was very phlegmatic no matter what he happened to be doing.' Above all, Stalin emerged as a powerful voice in Bolshevik propaganda.."

"To party circles as well as public audiences, he delivered speech upon speech, many of which were published in the press. Stalin wrote often in the main Bolshevik newspaper, while editing and shepherding into print far more. 14 Between August and October—the critical months— he authored some forty lead articles in Pravda and its temporary replacements"

Although Stalin needed to be persuaded by Lenin that socialist revolution was possible immediately, he put forward the position which he had also held in 1906 that rather than land nationalisation, favoured by Lenin, land should simply be distributed to peasants. He also opposed Lenin's slogan of turning the First World War into a European civil war, arguing that what the masses really wanted was peace. Thus two central Bolshevik slogans were those put forward by Stalin originally rather than Lenin.

Origins of Stalin's dictatorship.

One of the issues which is frequently discussed by socialists interested in the history of the Soviet Union is the origins of the one-man dictatorship under Stalin which had clearly emerged by the late 1920s. Marx himself tended to reduce politics to questions of class struggle. In a way this is what distinguishes his approach to society. However, there is plainly room for debate about priorities within a socialist society – for example, would it be better for people to devote their energies to developing the means of production, producing an epic film or improving services for elderly and vulnerable people? Marx may well have had it in mind that such debates would likely to occur, but did not spell this out. Instead there is apparently an assumption that the means of production would expand so much that 'to each according to his needs' would apply, meaning that such

debates would be unnecessary.

To this background was added Lenin's emphasis on the scientific validity of Marxism, and the Russian failure, thanks to czarist absolutism, to develop any kind of tradition of loyal opposition. There is, however, the argument that Trotsky favoured democratic debate, that Lenin also favoured democratic debate within certain limits, and that there is therefore a strong dividing line to be drawn between Lenin and Stalin. Given that it was Lenin that proposed the ban on factions in the Bolshevik party in 1921, supported by Trotsky; that at the same Congress it was agreed that two-thirds of the Central Committee could expel the other one-third, and that Lenin also introduced an objective definition of treason, essentially meaning that behaviour of which the authorities disapproved could be regarded as aiding the enemies of the Soviet Union and therefore potentially subject to the death penalty, this argument does not look particularly plausible.

Kotkin provides a variety of material which supports the idea of a high degree of continuity. He points out that Lenin closed some 60 newspapers, including some socialist newspapers in October and November 1917. In 1918 following the Brest Litovsk peace the Left Socialist Revolutionaries were critical of the peace treaty and wanted to re-start hostilities with Germany. Trotsky's contribution to free and open debate on this occasion was to say that:

"all 'agents of foreign imperialism' who were trying to provoke renewed war with Germany [meaning in this context, the Left Socialist Revolutionaries should] 'be shot on the spot.'"

Following an unsuccessful attempted coup by the Left Socialist Revolutionaries:

"The Cheka [the much-feared secret police set up by Lenin] initiated an immediate counter-coup against the Left SRs, solidifying the Bolshevik monopoly. The Cheka raided the editorial offices and smashed the printing facilities of non-Bolshevik periodicals. But many Left SRs in Bolshevik custody, including Alexandrovich— the saviour of L_cis— were executed immediately without trial; the Bolsheviks publicly announced that some 200 had been shot."

Other governments are quite capable of doing the same sort of thing – examples would be the fate of the Paris Commune, the murder of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, Chiang Kai-shek's slaughter of communists in 1927, Colonel Pinochet's torture and murder of leftists after the coup in Chile in 1972. However, we are definitely not looking at Lenin

and Trotsky encouraging a debate amongst fraternal socialists.

This episode left the Bolshevik leadership feeling thoroughly rattled in late 1918, resulting in the Red Terror of that time. Kotkin points out:

"There were at least 6,185 summary executions in the Red Terror of 1918— in two months. There had been 6,321 death sentences by Russian courts between 1825 and 1917, not all of them carried out."

Kotkin points out that there was a considerable amount of unrecorded repression by the czarist regime, but nonetheless the above puts things into an interesting perspective.

With the beginning of the civil war there was the danger that the cities might starve, and the Bolsheviks resorted to requisitioning grain from the peasants. Lenin's proposal for this process was:

"Lenin suggested that all peasants be compelled to deliver grain by name, and that those who failed to do so 'be shot on the spot.' Tsyurupa [the countryside in charge of grain requisitioning] and even Trotsky balked."

In 1922 there were proposals to put the Cheka on a more formal basis, ensuring, for example that people accused had access to a court trial. However, Kotkin notes:

"Lenin's crusade against fellow socialists vitiated the police reform. In August 1922, the GPU obtained the formal power to exile or sentence people to a labor camp without trial or court conviction, and by November was granted this prerogative even for cases lacking a specific anti-Soviet act, solely on the basis of 'suspicion.'"

Kotkin summarises Lenin's approach to politics thus:

"Once in power, Lenin elevated political violence to principle. Moderate socialists, in his mind, were more dangerous than open counterrevolutionaries, whom the moderates abetted with their 'ornate Socialist-Revolutionary and Menshevik phraseology about a people's government, a constituent assembly, liberties, and the like... . He who has not learned this from the whole history of the 19th century is a hopeless idiot.' Behind mundane disagreement he saw not legitimate opinion but malevolent forces. His conception of politics did not even allow for politics. Lenin railed against the idea that every society was made up of multiple interests that deserved competitive political representation and balancing as naively inviting in the 'wrong' interests ('bourgeois' or 'petit bourgeois'). He repudiated any separation of powers among executive, legislative, and judicial branches as a bourgeois sham. He rejected the rule of law as an instrument of class domination, not a protection against the state. He

dismissed the self-organization of society to hold the state in check. The upshot was a brutal intensification of tsarism's many debilitating features: emasculation of parliament, metastasizing of parasitic state functionaries, persecution and shakedowns of private citizens and entrepreneurs— in short, unaccountable executive power, which was vastly enhanced in its grim arbitrariness by a radiant ideology of social justice and progress."

Kotkin's view of Lenin is plainly a much more jaundiced one than that of many socialists, but the central idea in the above quotation that the state Lenin had brought into being gave no institutionalised power to ordinary citizens or groups of citizens against the government, and had no real checks and balances is basically accurate. What Kotkin calls the 'ideology of social justice and progress' distinguishes Soviet society from dictatorships which are simply the in the interests of a ruling class or clique. However, the view that human beings are perfectible and that the Soviet Union was heading for world revolution and a communist society superior to anything which humanity had so far produced, was used to justify measures against real existing human beings which were particularly ruthless. Kotkin's book plus points towards a view that there is a high degree of continuity between the regimes of Lenin and Stalin.

He reinforces this view by stressing that Lenin knew exactly what he is doing when he created the post of General Secretary specifically for Stalin. He treats the idea that Lenin accidentally gave Stalin too much power as a myth invented by other people for understandable reasons.

Trotsky himself, and others following in his footsteps, present a view of the last part of Lenin's life in which he became alarmed at the excessive power wielded by Stalin and cooperated with Trotsky in an attempt to unseat him. In contrast to this, Kotkin presents a picture in which Lenin had become thoroughly fed up with various aspects of Trotsky's behaviour:

"Lenin's illness also had an impact on his relations with Trotsky. No one had given him more grief. Once, at a politburo meeting, Trotsky was sitting studying the English language, then paused briefly to criticize the politburo's poor organization— causing Lenin to lose his composure. At another politburo meeting Trotsky was said to have called the Bolshevik leader 'a hooligan,' inducing him to turn 'white as chalk.' In March 1921 Lenin had deemed Trotsky 'a temperamental man ... as for policy [politika], he hasn't got a clue.' In summer 1921, Lenin had taken part in a

scheme to transfer Trotsky to Ukraine, a move that Trotsky, in breach of party discipline, resisted; Lenin backed down. Still, in violation of party rules, 'Lenin proposed that we gather for the politburo meetings without Trotsky,' Molotov recalled. 'We conspired against him.' Molotov, whose recollections comport with the archival record, added that 'Lenin's relations with Stalin were closer, albeit on a business footing.'"

The grain of truth in Trotsky's assertion, says Kotkin, is that when Lenin became thoroughly ill in 1922 he attempted to become reconciled with Trotsky. He presents Trotsky as inept in the manoeuvring which occurred on Lenin was ill, for example his refusal to become Lenin deputy. There is much debate about Lenin's apparent closeness to Trotsky in his final days, notably over the question of Georgia and Lenin's Testament, which was critical of several of the leading members of the party, including particularly the comment that Stalin should be removed from the post of General Secretary. Kotkin points out that Lenin was very seriously incapacitated by a series of strokes. He asserts that one cannot be certain, but that probably Lenin was too incapacitated to write coherently, and that his final writings were actually attributed to him by his wife and secretaries. He also emphasises that Stalin did not just win a bureaucratic battle but that he won the battle of ideas:

"Stalin not only managed to implant and cultivate immense numbers of loyalists, but also to invent for himself the role of Lenin's faithful pupil. Stalin's role as guardian of the ideology was as important in his ascendancy as brute bureaucratic force. In the 1920s, Communist party plenums, conferences, and congresses constituted the core of Soviet political life and of Stalin's biography; the political brawling shaped not just his methods of rule, but also his character, and image. To an extraordinary extent, it was skirmishes over ideas not solely personal power that preoccupied him and his rivals in the struggle to define the revolution going forward."

And to the extent that Stalin's victory was based upon the bureaucracy, Kotkin argues that Trotsky failed to understand what was involved:

"Trotsky famously wrote that 'Stalin did not create the apparatus. The apparatus created him.' This was exactly backward. Stalin created the apparatus, and it was a colossal feat."

Later, when Stalin was more firmly established in power, Trotsky in his *Revolution Betrayed* reinforces this view of Stalin as a successful bureaucrat by disparaging his *Problems of Leninism*:

"Stalin's *Problems of Leninism* constitutes a codification of this ideological garbage, an official manual of narrow-mindedness, an anthology of enumerated banalities (I am doing my best to find the most moderate designations possible) (Trotsky, 1931 – see www.Marxists.org – there are no page references)."

Having abused Stalin's writings as beneath contempt, Trotsky devotes much of the book to a critique of Rykov. Kotkin gives us a better insight as to why a simple text would be useful by pointing out that there was virtually no Bolshevik presence in the countryside in the form of party membership or party cells during the 1920s. One way in which Bolshevik ideology was spread more widely was through the Red Army. However, Kotkin points out that recruits were generally entirely ignorant of Bolshevik ideas, and that political commissars were only marginally better:"

"A 1924 study revealed that the call-ups were clueless about 'the Bolshevik party line, the party's struggle with Menshevism, and with other alien groups.' Another survey revealed that nearly nine tenths of the army's political educators had no more than two years of primary schooling. Meanwhile, newspapers and lectures were overrun with incomprehensible foreign words, neologisms, and jargon. 'Let's be frank,' one army educator noted, 'when we speak about banks, stock exchanges, parliaments, trusts, finance kings, and democracies, we are not being understood.'"

Kotkin makes a similar point about Stalin's earlier *Foundations of Leninism* (1924) – he acknowledges it was plagiarised, but says it was very judiciously plagiarised:

"His major work of the year, and of his life to that date, 'Foundations of Leninism,' was plagiarized. It proved to be a striking success, reflecting not just dishonesty but diligence and even sound judgment: he chose an excellent text, and appears to have sharpened it."

Socialism in one country.

Trotsky was famously very critical of the idea which Stalin promoted from 1924 onwards of socialism in one country. Kotkin points out that both in terms of the exposition in Stalin's writings and in his subsequent conduct Stalin had by no means giving up on the idea of spreading the revolution. Kotkin describes the text where Stalin first put forward this idea as follows:

"Stalin, moreover, was only declaring the possibility of socialism in one country first, for he noted that the 'final' victory of socialism required the help of the proletariat of several countries and that world revolution would still occur, most likely as a result of uprisings in countries under the yoke of imperialism,

and they could expect help from the USSR. This meant that the victory of socialism in one country actually 'bore an international character,' and that Russia had a special mission, now in revolutionary guise."

Kotkin points out that Stalin claimed that the prerequisite for revolution in other countries was some kind of inter-imperialist war similar to the First World War, which had created the special conditions which had made the October Revolution possible. This geopolitical vision was not entirely different from the events of the Second World War and afterwards.

Kotkin shows how Stalin was politically acute when it came to dealing with Lenin's Testament – he offered to resign at several successive Congresses, portraying himself as a humble follower of Lenin rather than a potential Napoleon figure such as Trotsky.

The collectivisation of the peasantry.

Kotkin's admirable book ends with a discussion of the run-up to the collectivisation of the peasantry. He emphasises the primitiveness of Russian agriculture, and basically says that the dilemma which confronted the Soviet leadership in the later 1920s was insoluble: the problem of getting peasants to produce surpluses and sell grain when the agricultural and other goods which they wanted in exchange were scarce and overpriced. He stresses the extremely radical nature of the sweeping collectivisation which actually occurred:

"Scholarly arguments that 'no plan' existed to collectivize Soviet Eurasia are utterly beside the point. No plan could have existed because actually attaining near complete collectivization was, at the time, unimaginable in practical terms. Collectivize one sixth of the earth? How? With what levers? Even the ultraleftist Trotsky, in a speech a few years back, had called a 'transition to collective forms' of agriculture a matter of 'one or two generations.'"

Kotkin stresses that the immediate results of were a disaster:

"urban shock troops would break peasant resistance, but the country's inventory of horses would plummet from 35 million to 17 million, cattle from 70 million to 38 million, pigs from 26 million to 12 million, sheep and goats from 147 million to 50 million. In Kazakhstan, the losses would be still more staggering: cattle from 7.5 million to 1.6 million, sheep from 21.9 million to 1.7 million. Countrywide, nearly 40 million people would suffer severe hunger or starvation and between 5 and 7 million people would die in the horrific famine, whose existence the regime denied."

Nevertheless, Kotkin's judgement is that Stalin held the regime together:

"ULTIMATELY, the principal alternative to Stalin was the willing abandonment or unwilling unhinging of the Bolshevik regime— which Stalin himself almost caused, and not just because of collectivization."

Kotkin's view is that the Soviet Union did not collapse thanks to the Great Depression. This meant that the capitalists were willing to sell the equipment that the Soviet Union needed in order to industrialise and in order to mechanise its agriculture at knock-down prices.

The book is the first part of a trilogy. I am not a specialist Soviet historian, but it seems to me that Kotkin's judgements are generally either sound or at least well-supported.

Soviet society under Stalin does not now look attractive to working people or intellectuals in the West. The lack of consumer goods, the lack of political freedom, and the pervasive quality of the terror are all unappealing.

Nonetheless, the Soviet Union was seen as a beacon by many in the Third World who

suffered humiliation and brutality from their colonial masters, and who lacked both consumer goods and political freedom. It also acted as a kind of welfare state for working people in the West in the sense that if unemployment and poverty became too extreme, as they were tending to do in the Great Depression, there was an alternative model. Since the fall of the Soviet Union and the triumph of neoliberalism in West, inequality between a tiny minority at the top of society and almost everybody else has grown dramatically. Whilst many other factors are undoubtedly involved, the lack of a socialist alternative as a restraining influence is almost certainly one reason for this.

Kotkin's book is well worth reading in that it provides a background to these developments. The next volume of the trilogy will be available this summer, and will be eagerly awaited by readers of his first volume.

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