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BOOKSHELF

The Generalissimo & the Chairman

At the end of World War II, some of America's experts on China saw Mao chiefly as a reformer, with only a superficial commitment to Marxism. They were wrong.



Going forward together A World War II-era poster soliciting contributions to the United China Relief fund. BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY

By **JEFFREY WASSERSTROM**

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In mid-1945, as Allied forces pushed toward victory in the Pacific, American political leaders faced a deepening dilemma. They could continue to work with both Mao Zedong's Communist insurgents and the Nationalist Party of Chiang Kai-shek (aka "the Generalissimo"), preparing for a postwar order based on some kind of coalition government in China. Or they could tilt unequivocally toward Chiang, who was still nominally China's head of state but controlled only those parts of the country not under the thumb of the Japanese military or the Red Army. Some well-informed American "China hands," both in the field and back in Washington, counseled that the corrupt, autocratic Generalissimo would eventually be defeated by the Communists (they were right). Mao, they went on, was best seen as an agrarian reformer who had only a surface commitment to Marxism-Leninism and who could easily be pried away from his allegiance to Stalin (they were wrong).

 CHINA 1945

 By Richard Bernstein
 Knopf, 445 pages, \$30

The year 1945 ended with the United States abandoning the notion of playing a broker's role in the nearly 20-year struggle between the Nationalists and Communists. The U.S. decisively backed the Generalissimo—a move that, among other things, paved the way for Mao's postwar vilification of him as

a willing tool of foreign imperialists determined to keep China from ever becoming fully independent. Richard Bernstein, in his skillfully crafted "China 1945," shows that this outcome was not inevitable and traces the fascinating series of diplomatic twists and turns it took to get to that point. Much has been written before about the fateful choice that America eventually made to side with the Nationalists and about whether the White House "lost China" by backing the wrong horse. Mr. Bernstein's answer to that question is simple: China was not America's to lose. What did in the Generalissimo was an unholy alliance between a scheming Stalin and a perfidious Mao.

More interesting, in many ways, is another question that looms in Mr. Bernstein's account: Should Americans who praised Mao as a freedom fighter be considered foolish or even traitors to the democratic cause? Again, his answer is no. People like Col. David D. Barrett, the leader of a major diplomatic mission to Communist-held areas, saw potential in Washington cooperating with Mao, and they had good reason to be disgusted with the Nationalists, having seen ample evidence of corruption within the Kuomintang. Such men knew that, through censorship and spin, Chiang's government was misleading observers about how the war was going. What these men failed to see was that Zhou Enlai and Mao were leading them equally astray about Communist intentions.

Mr. Bernstein provides a rich account of just how far the Communist leaders went in wooing, and misleading, the Americans: They arranged stage-managed trips and even chose an attractive bilingual spokeswoman to serve as a key liaison with the foreign press corps—all to convince American journalists, State Department employees and military men that Mao should be seen not as a ruthless acolyte of Stalin but as a liberal-minded figure ready to work with anyone who shared his desire to improve the lot of ordinary Chinese people.

As one might expect from a veteran journalist (and the former Beijing bureau chief for Time magazine), Mr. Bernstein is a talented storyteller. His lively set pieces, dealing sometimes with the eponymous year and sometimes with events that set the stage for or flowed from its developments, dramatize both battlefield skirmishes and the metaphorical parry and thrust of diplomats. His account of 1944's brutal Ichigo campaign, "the single largest Japanese offensive of the war, involving half a million men in seventeen divisions," offers

a compelling account of the ferocious fighting, which involved Japanese and Chinese forces in equal numbers, though the latter were “as always, malnourished and underequipped.” They suffered “astronomical” casualty totals and left roads “choked” with refugees.

Mr. Bernstein quotes at length from the wartime diary of the famous novelist Ba Jin, who witnessed the leveling of the beautiful city of Guilin: “I saw how the bombs exploded into flame, and I saw how the wind added to the fire, twisting two or three plumes of smoke together. . . . The black smoke was streaked with red flashes and huge red tongues of flame.” Yet Ba Jin wrote that watching this devastation with a “heart of hatred” did not leave him completely dispirited; there were moments of liveliness, even “glee and laughter,” that convinced him that “China’s cities cannot be bombed into fear.” Mr. Bernstein adds: “Simply to endure, to keep the hatred alive, was already a victory of sorts, at least a kind of redemption.” Then, returning to his larger theme of the struggle between Nationalists and Communists, he notes: “But to fight back was better, and the group that was perceived to be doing so most bravely and tenaciously would win the admiration of China’s people.”

“China 1945” contains many excellent character sketches of several players now largely forgotten except by specialists, such as Jack Service, a gentle man unjustly persecuted, first when the FBI accused him of being a spy in mid-1945, then when he was called a Communist during the McCarthy era. We meet colorful and powerful figures, such as Patrick J. Hurley, the bombastic American diplomat whose negative view of Service contributed to both of the aforementioned persecutions. Mr. Bernstein reports that Hurley’s first action when stepping off a plane to Yen’an, an area controlled by Mao’s forces, was to let out a strange cry that one American observer later described as a “prolonged howl.” Another likened it to an “Indian war whoop” that left the Communist leaders dumbfounded. It was, Mr. Bernstein says, Hurley’s way of “breaking the ice.”

Throughout the book, Mr. Bernstein draws upon Chinese-language journalism and memoirs, as in a wonderful chapter evoking the jubilant mood in China just after Japan’s surrender in September 1945, where he translates a section of a memoir by Shi Zhe, Mao’s Russian translator: “There were red flags all over, in the center [of Yen’an] and the surrounding mountains, drums beating, fireworks exploding, and people throwing hats in the air. The farmers gave away apples and pears, and people who didn’t know each other hugged and danced. That night the mountains and fields were seas of fire and floods of joy.”

This attention to the Chinese point of view sets Mr. Bernstein's book apart from its most celebrated precursor, Barbara W. Tuchman's 1971 "Stilwell and the American Experience in China, 1911-1945," which won the Pulitzer Prize. Both make use of the writings produced by the talented group of foreign journalists then based in China (including Agnes Smedley, Eric Sevareid, Martha Gellhorn and the Time-Life team of Theodore White and Annalee Jacoby). Tuchman was much more versed in American than Chinese history, and it showed.

If Mr. Bernstein's aim were merely to retell a dramatic tale, I would have nothing but praise for his book, but he also wants his retelling to settle debates. Most notably he wants to end the wide-ranging one over why exactly Mao emerged victorious in 1949. Yet he places too much emphasis on Mao's top-down scheming and Moscow's maneuvering to deliver land into the Red Army's hands when Japanese force withdrew. Shortchanged, if not ignored completely, are other crucial factors. The Communist's social programs and calls for land reform had genuine appeal for many Chinese farmers, and many among the intelligentsia had grown disgusted with Nationalist nepotism. Broad-based urban protests after 1945 eventually undermined the legitimacy of the Generalissimo, especially after his government used thuggish tactics to suppress the demonstrations. Skepticism about the morality and effectiveness of the Nationalist regime, as well as runaway inflation, led more and more Chinese to see Mao's camp, correctly or not, as less tainted, and perhaps a truer representative of the revolutionary ideals of the late Sun Yat-sen, the venerated figure from the 1911 Revolution whose legacy both sides claimed to be carrying forward.

Another shortcoming of the book is that the author frequently repeats himself in his efforts to exonerate those who counseled the White House to stop short of wholeheartedly backing Chiang. One reason for this may be that his own mentor, the influential Harvard historian John King Fairbank, was among the wartime "China Hands" who would later be castigated for "losing" the country.

Mr. Bernstein's ties to Fairbank matter in another way: He draws disproportionately on studies by those who, like him, studied with that field-shaping figure roughly a half-century ago, and this can give "China 1945" a slightly outdated feel. The book makes extensive use of former diplomat Jay Taylor's major 2009 biography of Chiang Kai-shek ("The Generalissimo: Chiang Kai-shek and the Struggle for Modern China"), but overlooks many works by scholars trained after his own graduate school days. Notable volumes missing from the bibliography include Anthony Saich's 1996 book on Mao, "The Rise to Power of the Chinese Communist Party"; the 1999 updated edition of Suzanne Pepper's "Civil War in China: The Political Struggle, 1945-1949"; and, more significantly still, various publications by Rana

Mitter, including “Forgotten Ally: China’s World War II, 1937-1945,” arguably the most important synthesis of the topic published in decades.

Scholars now often ask different questions about the era than those that absorb Mr. Bernstein, and the attempt to answer them has led us down interesting pathways. Why exactly did collaborationists, including figures such as Wang Jingwei, who had been a close ally to Sun Yat-sen and once had seemed a likely heir to him as head of the Nationalist Party, choose to side with Japan rather than with either Mao or the Generalissimo? What role did Japan’s fiercely anti-Communist stance play, after that country’s defeat, in limiting the effectiveness of the Generalissimo’s efforts to vilify Mao? And could it be that, as Mr. Mitter argues persuasively, the harshness of the wartime experience itself transformed the Nationalist and Communist camps alike, accentuating the most vicious tendencies within each, so that people with softening or liberalizing impulses had less and less room to maneuver?

Mr. Bernstein is certainly right that the events that surrounded the year’s “fateful choice” continue to cast a shadow over contemporary policy in both the U.S. and China. You can see this in the official Chinese media’s recent talk of nefarious “foreign forces” and in particular American conspirators working to undermine Beijing’s authority in, say, Hong Kong. If Mr. Bernstein seems at times to be taking old arguments and tropes out of mothballs, this is nothing compared to what the Chinese official press has been doing lately. Almost 70 years after Washington made its “fateful choice,” and in a world that is very different in so many ways, it is recycling rhetoric that would be instantly recognizable to those who were responsible for editorials in the Communist Party mouthpiece “Liberation Daily” back in the days of Patrick Hurley’s war whoops.

—*Mr. Wasserstrom is a professor of history at UC Irvine and author of “China in the 21st Century: What Everyone Needs to Know.”*

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