

'Revolution in Asia' from Le Figaro

Caption: On 5 January 1950, in the French newspaper Le Figaro, Raymond Aron examines the causes and the consequences of the Communist victory in China.

Source: Le Figaro. dir. de publ. Brisson, Pierre. 26.07.1951. Paris: Le Figaro. "Révolution en Asie", auteur:Aron, Raymond , p. 1; 10.

Copyright: (c) Translation CVCE.EU by UNI.LU

All rights of reproduction, of public communication, of adaptation, of distribution or of dissemination via Internet, internal network or any other means are strictly reserved in all countries.

Consult the legal notice and the terms and conditions of use regarding this site.

URL: http://www.cvce.eu/obj/revolution_in_asia_from_le_figaro-en-0c94f8c6-661c-4d29-8e96-de680694e753.html

Last updated: 06/07/2016



The Communist victory in China

by Raymond Aron

Hitherto, it seemed that the war in China was a matter of little concern for the French. It was only when Mao Tse-tung's troops reached the border of Indo-China that the public were shaken out of their indifference. And yet, the conquest of the former Chinese Empire by a revolutionary party, professing an ideology of Western origin which has now become the official religion of a Eurasian empire, constitutes a historic event, paradoxical at first sight and still unpredictable in its consequences.

With regard to what is happening in the Far East, two opposing attitudes seem to me to be equally fraught. Some commentators tend to think that the problems of Asia are similar to those of Europe, given that, to some extent, the opposing parties are the same. Other commentators, on the contrary, refuse to link the ups and downs of Far East politics with the international situation, claiming that Mao Tse-tung's success is due not to the attractiveness of Moscow dogma but to conditions prevailing in China itself. The problem is to put the Chinese revolution into its global context.

Chinese Communism

Knowledgeable observers agree on a certain number of points that have now been generally acknowledged.

(1) The triumph of the Chinese Communists is more similar to that of the Bolshevik Party in Russia, between 1917 and 1921, than to the Soviet take-over of Eastern Europe thanks to the presence of the Soviet army. Chiang Kai-shek received more aid from the United States than did Mao Tse-tung from Russia. The latter contributed to the arming of Communist troops by giving them equipment belonging to the Japanese army and they delayed by various means the arrival of nationalist troops in Manchuria. But most witnesses, even those with Western sympathies, agree that, after the abortive attempt at mediation by General Marshall, the nationalists still had superior equipment, especially heavy weapons. It was from their opponents that the Communists took most of their tanks.

(2) China was home to all the conditions required for the success of revolutionary parties, especially the Communist Party: mass poverty, too many people on too little land, the revolt of the peasants against the landowners, high interest rates and unpopular taxation. In addition, the disintegration of the traditional structure of society after several decades of unrest and a guerrilla war against the Japanese, the weakness and corruption of the old administration, the decay of oral traditions and the political disintegration of the government all worked in its favour. The example of China, after that of Russia, shows that Marxism, created by Marx for post-capitalist societies, has a better chance of success in pre-capitalist societies.

(3) The Chinese Communist leaders were not agricultural reformers, as suggested a few years ago by some Westerners interested in the debate. They were good Stalinists; their past was faultless. Since the split with the Guomindang in 1927, they never wavered, in word or deed, faithfully following the Comintern, then the Cominform (they conscientiously abused Tito). After their setbacks in the towns of the south and the Long March, they settled in a primitive north-west province (Yennan), and they concentrated on the agrarian revolution. But nothing leads us to believe that, in their eyes, this was any more than one of the stages along the way to a Soviet-style society, which was still their objective. It remains to be seen whether they have the means to build it.

(4) The advent of 'Titoism' in China, so often talked about, seems for the moment to be very unlikely. The Chinese Government is not as dependent on the Moscow Politburo as are the governments of the satellite countries in Europe. Tito's revolt may be accounted for by the economic hardship entailed by submission to Moscow and by the Soviet authorities' determination to keep the military apparatus and the police of these people's democracies under strict control. It seems that they will not make the same mistakes when dealing with a government controlling 400 million men, more nationalist than Communist and with a tendency to

xenophobia.

On the other hand, no one can predict what form of Communism will take root in China. In the long term, it will probably depend more on the Chinese people itself than on a few thousand militants schooled in Moscow. But no statesman can possibly predict so far ahead.

The American public quite rightly regards the advent of Communism as a disaster. Washington's diplomatic policy has traditionally been to protect China against encroachment by European imperialism. During the war, America considered China to be a great power of the future, and she imposed this notion on her allies. The end result is that the Soviet camp may soon be able to count on a second permanent member of the Security Council. And now, China, whose integrity, strength and prosperity the United States honestly wanted to defend, appears as an enemy, repeating with the zeal of the converted, the abuse and the doctrines of the master.

The disaster is more political than military. The task of transforming China into a modern State is far greater than that accomplished by the Bolsheviks. Mao Tse-tung starts from a much lower base. It is not enough to share out the land to feed the millions of undernourished peasants. The restructuring of Russia had already been started by the imperial regime and had developed at a rapid pace during the twenty years preceding the 1917 Revolution. China lacks everything: middle managers, engineers and capital. If it receives no external aid, industrialisation, financed by domestic savings, will lead to shortages even worse than those suffered by the Soviet Union during the first Five-Year Plans.

Should there be a third world war, undoubtedly a Communist China would side with the Soviet camp and threaten the countries of south-east Asia. But that, for the moment, is not the primary concern. Setting aside any strategic calculations, the Americans cannot but consider to be a catastrophe any enlargement of the zone of influence of orthodox Stalinism, bringing with it a reduction in the zone of free trade in goods, men and ideas.

It is easy to criticise the policy adopted by the State Department. The United States supported Chang Kai-shek to such an extent as to provoke hostility from the Communists (and even from many Chinese who opposed the Guomindang) but not to such an extent as to ensure its success. However, the response of the State Department, as set out in the White Paper, has never been contradicted. Billions of extra dollars would not have saved the nationalists (without reforms of which they were not capable), and the American public would not have tolerated complete non-intervention. Nevertheless, the solution adopted – limited support – although perhaps inevitable, included just about every drawback.

An alternative policy has still not been found.

Raymond Aron