

## Bandits and Bolsheviks

Rebuilding the revolutionary movement was a slow and painful process. The Shaanxi provincial leadership was a small group of committed Bolsheviks who struggled in vain to mobilize a proletarian revolution in a region without an industrial base. The real work of making revolution fell to guerrilla bands operating along the Shaanxi-Gansu border, organizing bandits, soldiers, and some poor peasants in the sparsely populated hills of the north. The provincial party was wary of the scruffy composition of these guerrilla gangs. It sought to transform them into a more disciplined Red Army by linking them to the party's early rural strongholds in Sanyuan and the Wei River valley. When this effort failed, the new Twenty-Sixth Red Army was ordered south of the Wei to the site of early activism in the Weinan-Hua-xian area. The result was a disastrous military defeat, and in 1933 the Shaanxi revolutionary movement again faced extinction. The only ground for hope came when arrests and defections eliminated most of the provincial leadership, liberating the guerrillas to develop their own strategy.<sup>1</sup>

### LIU ZHIDAN AND THE SHAAN-GAN BORDER REGION

The leader of the guerrilla movement and hero of the Shaanbei revolution was Liu Zhidan, from the poor, isolated, and sparsely populated county of Bao'an in the northwest. A student of party elder Wei Yechou at Yulin Middle School and graduate of the Whampoa Military Academy, Liu was killed in battle in 1936, shortly after the arrival of Mao Zedong and the main forces of the Red Army. In 1937, Bao'an was renamed after this martyr of the Shaanbei revolution, and party history accounts of Liu's exploits became so hagiographic that it is difficult to locate the real person. Photos and early descriptions show a slight, sinewy man with thick eyebrows and a prominent nose, features of many older Shaanbei families who intermarried with the Turkic people who roamed this region long ago (figure 4). Bao'an informants who knew him say he was a little cockeyed and did not look you



FIGURE 4. Liu Zhidan in Whampoa uniform.  
(Source: Wikimedia.)

in the face—though this description is absent from published accounts.<sup>2</sup> When Edgar Snow visited Bao'an in 1936, he described the recently killed Liu as a “chaotic warrior” and a “modern Robin Hood, with the mountaineer’s hatred of rich men.”<sup>3</sup> That seems close to the mark.

Liu came from a prominent local family in Bao'an, making him a “small local strongman” (*xiao tuhao* 小土豪), in the words of one press account.<sup>4</sup> His ancestors had acquired substantial landholdings when they returned to Bao'an following the devastation of the Muslim Uprising in the late Qing.<sup>5</sup> Liu's official biography and other sources state that his grandfather held a *gongsheng* degree and his father was a *xiucai*.<sup>6</sup> These claims of academic credentials and examination success are problematic. In republican era Shaanbei, teachers with some classical learning were often called *xiucai*. The grandfather's *gongsheng* degree is even more problematic. One of Liu's half brothers says that his grandfather never attended school, only listened at the window of a local school. This is unlikely to have been enough to pass the rigorous exams. The answer is almost certainly that there were county quotas for such lower examination degrees and that the Lius' modest learning was enough so it could be at least locally acknowledged as befitting such honors in this poor frontier district.<sup>7</sup> Liu's grandfather had a local reputation as a fair and just man, and his father was a teacher, a paperer for windows, and a clerk in the local militia. The hamlet in which Liu was born had only four households, but it lay on a main road to the west and Liu's father ran a small inn, so by Bao'an standards it counted as a town.<sup>8</sup> Despite these humble circumstances, this was a family with some local standing, and Liu's father was respected for launching a lawsuit against excessive taxation by a corrupt magistrate.<sup>9</sup>

Born in 1903, Liu benefited from his family's prominence. He studied a classical curriculum with his father and grandfather, then at age fifteen transferred to the county primary school in Yongningshan—the mountain stronghold to which the county government had retreated to escape bandits. Two years later Liu married a local girl. He was ready to continue his studies, and this was the time when families found their sons a supportive spouse.<sup>10</sup> Liu planned to continue his studies in Xi'an, but bandits made the trip too perilous, and in 1922 he went to middle school in Yulin. Already nineteen years old and married, he was much more mature than middle school students today, but not unusual for Shaanbei at this time. He took remedial courses to overcome deficiencies in English and mathematics, but his skill in Chinese allowed him to make extra money ghostwriting essays and entrance papers for his classmates. In Yulin, he was active in the student association and was introduced to Marxism by Wei Yechou. He joined the Common Progress Society and then the Communist Party, and in 1925 was selected to attend the Whampoa Military Academy in Guangdong. During the National Revolution of the 1920s, he was back in Shaanxi, holding political positions in Feng Yuxiang's army, then participated in the Wei-Hua Uprising of 1928.<sup>11</sup>

Returning to Bao'an following the setbacks of the Great Revolution, Liu was appointed as education inspector by a progressive local magistrate who had studied with him in Yulin. He used the post to travel about in a student uniform, organizing young people in peaceful struggles to combat the famine then ravaging the population: forcing grain sales at low prices and compelling the well-off to distribute food to the poor.<sup>12</sup> He was no doubt aided in these efforts by his soft-spoken, approachable, and socially adept manner. Liu was not given to large public meetings: we have few accounts of any memorable speeches. His strength was person-to-person human relations, and he was able to get along with anyone, poor peasants or military officers, bandits or members of the local elite.<sup>13</sup> Himself a man of the periphery, he readily embraced the local customs and values. Sensitive to conservative views on gender relations, he cautioned members of his guerrilla bands against mixing with women.<sup>14</sup> In a region where sharing an opium pipe was an important part of male bonding, Liu himself smoked until party superiors forced him to quit in 1933.<sup>15</sup> To recruit members of the powerful Society of Brothers, he became a sworn brother and assumed a position of some status in the society. As he later wrote, "There are many Brothers [Gelaohui] in the Soviet area. They are righteous folks who have helped us a lot and with whom we have had a long relationship."<sup>16</sup>

Despite his early membership in the Communist Party, there is no evidence that Liu was a systematic political thinker. His view of the party and its purposes was simple. The party "represents the interests of the broad masses, opposes imperialism, feudalism, compradors, corruption, and oppressive taxes."<sup>17</sup> He showed little interest in the party as an elite revolutionary vanguard: "Whoever wants to join the revolution can join the party."<sup>18</sup> The aim of the revolution was "to establish

a democratic regime, let the tiller have his own land without oppressive taxation. Let the peasants pass their days in peace.”<sup>19</sup> Even when the party promoted a strict proletarian line against landlords and rich peasants, Liu focused his attacks on “gentry strongmen [*haoshen*] and landlords.”<sup>20</sup> He favored the broadest possible revolutionary alliance: “uniting not only all peasants, craftsmen, merchants, and scholars but also gentry, militia heads, and Society of Brothers members who have a good conscience and do not oppress the peasants.”<sup>21</sup> To the revolution in Shaanbei he brought a commitment to equality and popular rule (however vaguely conceived) and an unshakable optimism.<sup>22</sup> A critical element of Liu’s appeal was his personal commitment to these egalitarian ideals. He maintained much of the May 4 notion that one’s personal conduct was an important component of political commitment. Sewing to patch his own clothes, cooking for his men, giving up his horse for a wounded soldier, sleeping outside when others occupied all available beds: these stories abound in recollections of Liu Zhidan, and while they smack of typical party hagiography, they have a ring of truth.<sup>23</sup> The one luxury he allowed himself was chain-smoking expensive Hataman cigarettes.<sup>24</sup>

Liu was primarily a military man, a man of violence. In 1925, on his way to the Whampo Academy, he traveled via Sanyuan to attend a convention of the Common Progress Society. There he left a passionate message: “Comrades! Lead the oppressed people to attack imperialism. Spare no sacrifice! Fight through the bloody road. The future will be bright and happy!”<sup>25</sup> His personal asceticism, his readiness to sacrifice and “endure bitterness” (*chiku* 吃苦), was an integral part of the military lifestyle that he embraced.<sup>26</sup> His simple living, sharing the tough life of a guerrilla, earned him the loyalty of his men. But he could also be ruthless. Once he shared an opium pipe with a militia commander whose weapons he coveted and then, once his prey was appropriately relaxed, disarmed and killed him.<sup>27</sup> On another occasion he slit the throat of a turncoat responsible for the death of a comrade and let him bleed to death overnight.<sup>28</sup>

One key to Liu Zhidan’s success as a guerrilla fighter was his intimate knowledge of Shaanbei geography. Those who fought with him called him a “living map.”<sup>29</sup> He seemed to know where each stream led, the easiest path over a hill, the safest approach to a town. The deep gullies, patches of woodland, and high loess plateau of the area were undoubtedly suitable to guerrilla warfare, but familiarity with the physical and human geography was required. In this early stage of armed struggle, the area along the Shaanxi-Gansu border was most important. Both sides of the border were sparsely populated after the devastation of the Muslim Rebellion of the 1860s. Famine in the 1870s and again in 1928–29 had slowed recovery. A sparse population meant that land was relatively plentiful, and in some areas whole hills could be claimed by new migrants. In this respect it was quite different from the more densely populated areas of Mizhi and Suide, along the Wuding River in the northeast of the province, where land was more concentrated in the lands of the gentry elite.<sup>30</sup>

In this poor, isolated, and thinly populated region, the republican state was particularly weak. The Shaanxi-Gansu border region lay between three competing warlords: Yang Hucheng in Xi'an, Ma Hongkui in Ningxia, and Jing Yuexiu in Yulin. Technically, Jing Yuexiu was responsible for Bao'an and the surrounding Shaanxi counties, but these counties were far from Jing's base in the northeast and too poor to offer any incentive to invest his limited political capital or military resources.<sup>31</sup> Though often called the "local emperor" of Shaanbei, Jing himself and most of his army were from Pucheng, in the Wei River valley. An outsider in the north, he was reluctant to strengthen the local militia.<sup>32</sup> The Gansu side of the border was even more unsettled. Separated from the provincial capital by the Liupanshan mountain range, eastern Gansu (Longdong 陇东) was the home of competing petty warlords who preyed on the sparse and impoverished population.<sup>33</sup> The civil administration was ineffective and usually corrupt, with magistrates changing as each new militarist came to power.<sup>34</sup>

A weak and divided state and a geography of deep gullies, wooded hills, and sparse population created a ready environment for guerrilla warfare; but before there were Communist guerrillas there were bandits. As noted above, banditry was such a persistent problem in this area that the county government of Bao'an had withdrawn to the natural defenses of Yongningshan (figure 1). The fact that Bao'an was on the Gansu border made it particularly vulnerable: bandits could easily flee to the next province, where the authorities were reluctant to pursue them. The chaotic politics of republican China and lack of a trusted judiciary made the problem worse. Analyzing the social origins of banditry is challenging, though Phil Billingsley's study of neighboring Henan suggests patterns common in Shaanxi.<sup>35</sup> Several of the known bandit leaders were small merchants or shop workers who turned to criminal activity because of some dispute in which they felt wronged and without legal recourse. Others were former soldiers, opium smugglers, or martial artists, men living on the commercial fringes of agrarian life, or village bullies with a taste for power. Soldiers from the small warlord armies who left the army when rations were cut were particularly important.<sup>36</sup> These men had the military skills to become leaders of bandit gangs, but it is likely that many of the nameless men around them were poor peasants escaping the poverty and dull routines of agrarian toil. Invariably they were young men, in their teens or twenties, usually still unmarried and inclined to a risky life. The power of the Society of Brothers, which played such an influential role in the 1911 Revolution, and such "superstitious organizations" as the Red Spears (Hongqianghui 红枪会) also testifies to the extent of criminal activity in the area, for they both participated in petty crime—gambling, opium smuggling, and prostitution—and protected their members from prosecution.<sup>37</sup> The invulnerability rituals of the Red Spears were shared by the Hard Bellies (Yingdu 硬肚), who led an anti-tax protest in Bao'an in the 1920s.<sup>38</sup>

With banditry rife on the Shaanxi-Gansu border, the well-to-do naturally sought to defend themselves with local militia. Power and influence in this region

depended on control of the gun. The vast majority of local elite families lived within well-armed fortified stockades.<sup>39</sup> But we should resist assuming a simple conflict between aggrieved and impoverished bandits and self-protecting local elites. Bandits and militia coexisted in a distinctly symbiotic relationship. In this depopulated border region, many villages and towns had been abandoned.<sup>40</sup> Bandit gangs would occupy these places, often large bands with hundreds of fighters. Such bands could be well armed; the bandits were tough fighters who knew how to use their weapons and were familiar with the local terrain.<sup>41</sup> An attack on these bands by militia or even local warlords would entail significant casualties. Accordingly, it was not uncommon for warlords to give bandit gangs unit designations and assign them militia duties in the area. For the bandits, this assured some immunity from attack and provided salaries, provisions, weapons, and a measure of legitimacy. This dynamic produced an area dominated by “bandit warlords” (*tufei junfa* 土匪军阀).<sup>42</sup> If these bandit-militia were not paid on time, as was often the case in times of fiscal stringency, they would mutiny and return to their bandit ways.<sup>43</sup>

Some militia were genuine self-defense organizations of local villagers, but often they were protecting peasants from the exactions of tax collectors and warlords as well as those of bandits. Especially after the famine of 1928–29, impoverished peasants, even if poorly armed, organized to defend against the unbearable taxes of the local state.<sup>44</sup> If the state’s exactions violated local norms, the response could be violent. One attempt to collect taxes during a wedding ceremony resulted in the assassination of the local strongman guilty of the offense.<sup>45</sup> In general, no simple model associating militia or bandits with specific class interests can accurately capture the complex dynamics of this troubled border region. What is clear is that the area underwent significant militarization, and violence was becoming routine. Power mattered, and especially the power of the gun.

When Liu Zhidan returned to Bao’an in 1928, his initial organizing followed the approach of the 1920s—working through the education system with the support of a sympathetic magistrate. The county education commissioner and principal of the higher primary school at Yongningshan were both Communists, and they were able to appoint comrades and sympathizers to influence students in local schools.<sup>46</sup> The students naturally came from families of some means, and one informant reported that these early Communists all came from wealthy families.<sup>47</sup> Soon, however, Liu shifted his attention from organizing students (who were scarce in Bao’an) to approaches more suited to his own military training. He gained an appointment in the local militia with which his father had served, under a local commander with whom the Liu family was related by marriage. The commander regarded Liu as a rival, but also a powerless young intellectual, and boasted that his guns could overcome Liu’s pen.<sup>48</sup> Liu headed a local detachment, which he tried to use for a revolutionary coup; but his new recruits had only one day of weapons training, the attempt failed, and Liu shifted to working for the petty warlords of eastern Gansu.<sup>49</sup>

As the party sought a new path to revolutionary success, army work (*bingyun*), organizing mutinies within the old regime's military, was an important component. There was good precedent for this approach, both in China's own Republican Revolution and in Leninist practice during the Russian Revolution. Working in the army required high levels of secrecy, which meant that agents operated under single-line reporting and their activities were rarely recorded in the surviving documents of the provincial committee. Some reported directly to the Center.<sup>50</sup> It was dangerous work, and the army was not always welcoming of new student recruits, funneling them into training units where they sang patriotic songs and did calisthenics but rarely handled weapons.<sup>51</sup> Army life was tough, and most of the young students who joined the party in the 1920s were unsuited for work in the military. The party discovered that "our comrades cannot get used to the harsh life of soldiers."<sup>52</sup> Certainly the results were not encouraging. The veteran Shaanxi revolutionary Xi Zhongxun reported that there were over seventy failed mutinies in the area.<sup>53</sup> The east Gansu mutiny in which Xi himself was involved was a particularly chaotic and badly bungled affair.<sup>54</sup> Liu Zhidan was more suited to this work, but he too had scant success.

In 1929–30, Liu spend most of his time organizing within small army units along the Shaanxi-Gansu border. The party's policy stressed building a base among the poorly paid and ill-treated soldiers, educating them about the oppressive system that enriched and empowered their officers. It cautioned against a top-down "officer line" of working through friends and sympathizers in the officer corps.<sup>55</sup> In fact, Liu Zhidan and others were able to join the army precisely because of their personal relations with other officers, their local affiliations, and, in Liu's case, his past service in Ma Hongkui's army and the prestige of his Whampoa credentials. In many ways, it was an alliance of mutual convenience: the local warlords, some of whom were aware of Liu's past membership in the party, needed capable officers with an upstanding reputation to recruit allies, while Liu needed arms and recruits for his revolutionary aims.<sup>56</sup> Once appointed as officers, party members like Liu could earn the loyalty of ordinary soldiers by treating them well. The hierarchical principles of military command, plus the fact that provisions, uniforms, ammunition, and the logistical supplies that soldiers relied on came from above, made this approach far more promising than the party's tactic of organizing from below.

Despite his success in gaining appointments in small warlord armies of the periphery, Liu's superiors in the party were not pleased, and for a time he was disciplined and expelled.<sup>57</sup> Though Liu undoubtedly gained military experience through these efforts, the mutinies that he led all ended in failure. On one occasion he was captured by an enemy force, regaining his freedom only when that army was itself defeated.<sup>58</sup> In another case, he led a successful mutiny, then allowed the regularization of his troops in order to secure weapons and uniforms.<sup>59</sup> In the spring of 1931, he again let his band be absorbed by a local warlord, but when excessive exactions by his troops provoked the suicide of a powerful local landlord,

his superiors turned on him. Liu was arrested, and it took the intervention of his former Yulin principal, Du Bincheng, and a Communist agent in Governor Yang Hucheng's staff to get him released.<sup>60</sup> It was clear that working within the enemy's armed forces was not an easy path to revolutionary success. Liu needed a guerrilla force of his own, and for this he turned to the other armed groups in this border region, the bandits.

As we have seen, the line between petty warlords, local militia, and bandits was by no means clear. Indeed, one of the small warlords with whom Liu had served, Chen Guizhang, was himself a former bandit.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, the bandit gangs to which Liu turned were quite large, reflecting their quasi-legitimate status as armed groups on the frontier. The most famous of these bandit leaders was Zhao Lianbi, more commonly known by his childhood nickname, Zhao Erwa. Zhao was a poor peasant, a former agricultural laborer from Bao'an, who was related to Liu by marriage. The two had known each other since childhood and maintained a friendship. Zhao had a reputation as a fierce fighter, was much feared, and was an excellent shot. Sympathetic accounts say that Zhao was forced into banditry by poverty, but it is likely that his military skills were first learned in some local militia. By 1931, Zhao had assumed a position as militia head in the small town of Taibai just across the border in Gansu.<sup>62</sup> His own band had seventy to eighty men and thirty guns; he was joined by a Gansu group about twice that size but with few weapons, and another led by a famine refugee from Shenmu in far northeastern Shaanxi, about half the size, also poorly armed.<sup>63</sup>

Liu Zhidan used his local connections and prominent position in the Society of Brothers to recruit these bandits into his guerrilla army, hoping to educate them to his revolutionary cause and gradually reform their bandit ways. The process was a slow one, and Liu was unusually patient and tolerant of established habits. Most of the bandits continued to smoke opium, and they expected their leaders to split the loot after raids on local elites. Leadership was personalized, and Liu Zhidan himself was typically addressed, not by any official title, but simply as "Old Liu" (老刘). Sworn brotherhood was the tie securing relationships within and between bands, and soldiers' committees gave power to the rank and file.<sup>64</sup>

Although the guerrillas supported themselves by raids on the local elite, Liu was cautious about making enemies unnecessarily. In general, the greatest threat along the Shaanxi-Gansu border was the local militia, but he was willing to make local non-aggression pacts with these forces. This allowed him to exchange opium and other loot for weapons, ammunition, and provisions and gain militia assistance to harbor wounded fighters.<sup>65</sup> Similar arrangements were made with Society of Brothers leaders in the area.<sup>66</sup> In this way, over the course of 1930–31, Liu built a small guerrilla band of his own in this troubled border region. Then he was joined by a group led by the other key leader and martyr of the Shaanbei revolution—a man from the eastern side of the region where the party had established a foothold in the 1920s, Xie Zichang.

## XIE ZICHANG

Three counties in northern Shaanxi are named for martyrs of the revolution. Bao'an was renamed Zhidan shortly after Liu's death. Toward the end of the war against Japan, a new county was formed in the former guerrilla areas west of Suide and named for Li Zizhou, the Peking University graduate and member of the first revolutionary generation. Between these years, Anding County, also neighboring Suide, was renamed Zichang County, with its seat in the prominent town of Wayaobu. Zizhou honored the founding generation; Zhidan and Zichang were named for the leaders of the Shaanbei party's two factions, groups that both cooperated and competed and that continue to dispute the history of the revolution to this day.<sup>67</sup>

Official biographies provide few clues to the origins of the dispute that plagued the relationship between Shaanbei's two revolutionary leaders. Their backgrounds seem remarkably similar. Xie was born in January 1897, six years before Liu Zhidan. He came from a prosperous Anding family that combined farming with an inn that provided shelter and fodder for passing mule trains. Like Liu, he was already an adolescent when he started school: fourteen when he went to winter school, and seventeen when he started primary school. In 1919, when the May Fourth Movement broke out, he was in Xi'an, and in 1920 he transferred to the same Yulin Middle School that Liu attended. While Liu went to the Nationalist Party's Whampoa Military Academy, Xie attended a military school established by Yan Xishan in neighboring Shanxi.

On the personal side, Xie lost both of his elderly parents, his father dying in 1925 and his mother in the following year. His mother had been a famine victim, bought into the family as a child, and she allegedly inspired Xie's concern for the poor. Xie's family arranged a marriage while he was young, but Xie never seems to have lived with the uneducated country girl.<sup>68</sup> In 1933, the party arranged a marriage to a young comrade, a former teacher in Anding with whom Xie had corresponded. The marriage was not a happy one, and his bride did not return with Xie to Shaanbei.<sup>69</sup> The social and psychological implications of these personal details are impossible to judge, but Liu was clearly more easygoing and relaxed in his leadership style, while Xie was "sharp and determined," perhaps a bit uptight.<sup>70</sup>

Liu was very much a soldier and a man of the disorderly frontier, while Xie's life was regularly led within the party. Liu thrived in the military and looked the part as an army man. Xie, by contrast, was thin and short, with the sallow face of a student (figure 5). Some found him physically unimpressive.<sup>71</sup> As far as their careers were concerned, some differences appear during the National Revolution. In the 1920s, while Liu served in the Nationalist armies in Guangzhou and with Feng Yuxiang, Xie traveled to Beijing, where he joined the Common Progress Society and then the Communist Party, returning to Anding to serve in the local militia. In the militia, Xie was active in local politics, mobilizing students, organizing peasant associations, working on democratic reforms with a progressive magistrate though also privately encouraging students to attack



FIGURE 5. Xie Zichang.

the magistrate for corruption, and building a reputation for stern probity that earned him the sobriquet “Blue Sky Xie” (谢青天). Like many in the militia, he was a member of the Society of Brothers, indeed a local leader, which made him both respected and feared.<sup>72</sup> He was a strict disciplinarian, punishing rowdy arsenal workers in one New Year celebration and executing looters during the 1927 Qingjian Uprising, in which he played a leading role, before joining Liu Zhidan in the Wei-Hua Uprising.<sup>73</sup>

After the failure of the Qingjian and Wei-Hua uprisings, Xie sought refuge in Liu’s Bao’an home, then moved to eastern Gansu, where he joined some of the same military units as Liu Zhidan, working to foment mutinies. Xie was probably responsible for one of these early fiascos, having recruited followers from an Anding bandit gang whose leader defected when the local militia commander offered his sister in marriage.<sup>74</sup> Then, early in 1931, a small Communist group in Shanxi organized a guerrilla detachment whose leadership included Yan Hongyan, who came from the same Anding County as Xie and had served in the same local military units in 1927. After some success while the Shanxi warlord Yan Xishan was recovering from his failed challenge to Chiang Kai-shek, the effort faltered, and eventually some thirty well-armed guerrillas crossed the Yellow River to Shaanxi. They were able to contact the local party organization through Xie Zichang’s brother, and they strengthened their numbers by the addition of a detachment of guards for opium smugglers.<sup>75</sup> Their activity in Anding gained little popular support, and the provincial committee described it as “pure military opportunism, looting and burning like bandits.”<sup>76</sup> Failing to establish a base in the east, the group fled to the Shaan-Gan border where they sought out Liu Zhidan and offered Yan’s prized Mauser pistol as a token of friendship.<sup>77</sup>

The combination of Liu Zhidan's band with this new group from Shanxi and eastern Shaanbei created a substantial guerrilla force on the Shaan-Gan border. The largely bandit armies that Liu had recruited numbered some four hundred, and the Shanxi group plus the opium guards added another two hundred or so.<sup>78</sup> At this point, late in 1931, the provincial committee began to pay attention to the guerrilla movement and sent Xie Zichang to strengthen its leadership.<sup>79</sup> A representative was dispatched from the provincial committee to provide political guidance: Gao Weihai, a returned student from Moscow. His reports on the guerrillas were not encouraging. The class composition of the guerrillas was deemed "exceptionally bad. . . . Most are still bandits, with proletarian thugs the great majority."<sup>80</sup> Political consciousness was non-existent: "According to our investigations, when they have opium, then Communism and the Red Army are great. But when their addiction strikes, they go crazy. If left among the people, they pilfer things, but fortunately they do not dare steal openly or rape women. The second detachment [Liu Zhidan's group] is the worst. They often go out to steal and rape, exactly like bandits."<sup>81</sup> Since these guerrillas had been recruited through personal relations and brotherhood oaths, their loyalty was not to the party or the revolution but to their leaders. The peasants regarded them as the personal armies of the leaders: "In the area around the guerrillas' base or through which they have passed, the peasants know only of His Excellency Liu's [*Liu daren* 刘大人] army or His Excellency Xie's army. They have never heard of the Red Army, much less a soviet."<sup>82</sup> Within the guerrilla bands, Liu Zhidan was still addressed as simply "Old Liu."<sup>83</sup>

Among the guerrillas, personalized command was checked by a kind of primitive democracy. There were soldiers' committees for discipline, but they could also criticize commanders. Cooking and supply duties were shared by all, and loot was split among the men. To orthodox Bolsheviks, this all smacked of "ultra-democratic" errors.<sup>84</sup> Party reports complained of fighting and petty quarrels among the troops and difficulty in carrying out any political education. "Among these . . . , almost three-quarters are Shaanbei men. They did not join this army for political reasons but were recruited for their local affiliations [*tongxiang ganqing* 同乡感情]. The vast majority of soldiers are making revolution just for the twenty silver dollars per month. When there are economic difficulties, many just leave. In this group, there are many who, in the local dialect, 'like to show off' [*kuangjiazi* 诳架子]."<sup>85</sup> The economic appeal of life with the guerrillas was undeniable. Many obviously joined for the generous (by Shaanbei standards) guaranteed monthly salary of twenty dollars: "In the eyes of the masses, the Communist Party is where you eat well; so they call out, 'The Communist Party eats well!' or 'running dogs of the Communist Party.'" If the leaders could not deliver the promised pay, soldiers left with their weapons and returned to a life of banditry.<sup>86</sup>

Despite the questionable political commitments of this army, it was now a substantial force of some six hundred fighters.<sup>87</sup> Not all had firearms; there were only 250 guns, and ammunition was particularly wanting. To solve this problem, the

guerrillas chose a familiar solution: enrolling their force under a local warlord, who supplied uniforms for the coming winter, plus supplies and ammunition. Additional weaponry was supplied through an approach to Du Bincheng, teacher and patron to both Liu and Xie, then an aide to Yang Hucheng. With the army now supplied, eight key leaders cemented their new alliance with a sworn brotherhood.<sup>88</sup> It was now the winter of 1931. The Japanese had occupied Manchuria in September, and nationalist sentiment was strong. The party decided that their new army would be called the Northwest Anti-imperialist Alliance (Xibei fandi tongmeng jun 西北反帝同盟军), which could appeal to the rising nationalism without associating this problematic bandit-filled force with the Red Army name.<sup>89</sup> This solution seems to have appealed to the “bandits” as well, for they were reluctant to submit to the kind of discipline expected in the Red Army.<sup>90</sup>

As Chinese New Year approached, the new army was located near the Shaanxi-Gansu border, each detachment in a separate hamlet near the village of Sanjiayuan (三嘉原). Zhao Erwa's band was sent out to collect provisions. He came back with 1,000 yuan, opium from a nearby market where it was used in lieu of cash, pigs for a feast, and several mules to haul the loot. His exactions irritated the local villagers, who also complained that Zhao and his gang had abused local women.<sup>91</sup> According to one report, when Zhao's men passed a fortified village with a powerful landlord, the residents cursed them and threw stones. The band retaliated by attacking the village in a melee that degenerated into looting, beatings, and rape.<sup>92</sup> Xie Zichang and Liu Zhidan had discussed disciplining the guerrillas and reforming their bandit ways, but Liu had always favored a more gradual and tolerant approach, hoping, over time, to reeducate bandits to focus their violence on those with wealth and power while protecting ordinary peasants. Xie, on the other hand, had severely punished misbehavior by his troops since his days as a militia commander in Anding. Stern punishment of any abuse of power had earned him that nickname “Blue Sky Xie,” and this time, Xie was determined to act, so he met privately with the other cadres without informing Liu.

The next day, which was either Chinese New Year or the day after, a meeting of the entire guerrilla force was called, their weapons stacked to the side. Zhao Erwa's group stood in front as Xie Zichang mounted a millstone to address them. Xie stressed the absolute necessity of discipline in a guerrilla army and criticized Zhao Erwa by name. Zhao reacted, perhaps reaching for his pistol, and was immediately shot dead together with two of his followers. Liu Zhidan was disarmed (though Xie returned his gun that evening), and Liu's detachment was disarmed and then dismissed. The next day, the detachment of opium guards from Anding also left, reducing the guerilla force to a fraction of its former size. A fine coffin was bought for Zhao Erwa, in an attempt to soften the blow of this rift, but the damage had been done.<sup>93</sup>

Several days later, another assembly was called to rename the Anti-imperialist Alliance as the Shaanxi-Gansu Guerrilla Detachment of the Chinese

Worker-Peasant Red Army (中国工农红军陕甘游击队). With the key bandit and opium guard units gone, the red flag could be proudly raised. Liu Zhidan was removed from command and sent to report to Xi'an. Xie Zichang was named commander of the now-reduced force, and the provincial delegate Gao Weihan became the political commissar.<sup>94</sup> At last the region had an official Red Army unit, but the collaboration of Shaanbei's two guerrilla leaders had gotten off to a distinctly shaky start.

#### PROBLEMS IN THE PROVINCIAL PARTY

China entered the 1930s with the revolution in retreat. Following his purge of the Communists in 1927, Chiang Kai-shek was briefly tested by leftist politicians in the Nationalist Party. By 1930, however, he had full control of the party and army, and the national government in Nanjing was gaining traction. Chiang crushed a 1930 challenge by the northern warlords Yan Xishan and Feng Yuxiang, creating a more unified political system than China had seen since the fall of the Qing. Internationally, his regime made progress rolling back the limits on Chinese sovereignty imposed by Western and Japanese imperialism, regaining tariff autonomy, which allowed it to increase customs taxes and protect Chinese industry, and recovering some foreign concessions in treaty ports. China's silver-based currency shielded it from the initial effects of the global depression, and the economy recovered at a decent pace. Across the country, Communists had been driven underground and into the hills, where they continued to threaten the local order, but no longer posed an existential threat to the Nationalist regime. All things considered, the future was not bright for the Chinese Communist Party.

In Shaanxi, following the arrests of 1929, the provincial Communist Party was in shambles. Many Communists defected and published criticisms of the party in the newspapers; others simply drifted away. The Xi'an branch was reduced to twelve members. The small remaining group felt isolated and neglected by the Center, complaining of the lack of money and direction.<sup>95</sup> Through all this, the Comintern sought to rally its forces with a strident optimism, heralding the coming "high tide" of revolution, a line that the Shaanxi party dutifully parroted.<sup>96</sup> At the Center, new leadership under Li Lisan pushed this left line even further than Moscow wished, calling for uprisings in one or several provinces and more emphasis on urban struggle. This strategy was loyally repeated by the provincial leadership.<sup>97</sup> In Shaanbei, where there were no cities and the proletariat was non-existent, party orthodoxy prevailed over common sense as local cadres were urged to concentrate on urban work.<sup>98</sup> The Center's policies were not always accepted without debate. Many remained sympathetic to the moderate intellectual leaders of the 1920s.<sup>99</sup> When party elder Luo Zhanglong challenged Li Lisan's adventurist line and then broke with the Center's new Moscow-imposed leadership, organizing

an alternative “emergency conference” in North China, the Xi’an committee temporized for a while, until the Comintern made clear that it would support only one Community Party.<sup>100</sup> With the local party utterly dependent on the Center for financial support, it soon fell in line—despite any doubts on the appropriateness of the Center’s radical optimism.

When Li Lisan was replaced by the new Moscow-supported leadership in 1931, the urban-oriented proletarian line continued. The Center urged Shaanxi to concentrate its efforts on “workshop workers as in Xi’an and the rural proletariat.” The peasant movement was similarly expected to take “Xi’an as the center.”<sup>101</sup> The provincial party again fell in line. Its reports show a focus on May Day demonstrations in the cities, organizing salt workers, porters, printers, almost anyone it could find who looked like a member of the proletariat. In rural Fuping County, the committee resolved to “institute urban work, in order to establish the central leadership of the cities.”<sup>102</sup> In rural work, a firm class line was advanced. As Stalin pressed his campaign against kulaks for their resistance to collectivization in the Soviet Union, the CCP obediently followed the Communist International by increasing attacks on the “rich peasant line.”<sup>103</sup>

In Shaanxi, as elsewhere in China, the most common form of peasant protest was tax resistance. Such movements in Shaanxi took the specific form of demonstrations in which peasants deposited their tools at the magistrate’s *yamen*, an act called *jiaonong* that amounted to a work stoppage protesting unbearable taxes. Such demonstrations were typically led by men with some influence in the area, usually rich peasants or gentry, the same people who bore the greatest tax burden.<sup>104</sup> The party recognized this pattern and condemned it as an opportunist error: “In most mass struggles in Shaanxi, the greatest danger is the party’s failure to go among the masses and establish its own leadership. . . . Most rural struggles are under the leadership of rich peasants, local strongmen, and landlords and stop at tax resistance, not entering the stage of land revolution.” What the party should do was carry out land revolution and “on this foundation, organize local uprisings and create soviet bases.”<sup>105</sup> Not only was it wrong to stress tax resistance over land redistribution and soviets, it was wrong to wage guerrilla struggles on the periphery and then escape into the mountains like bandits.<sup>106</sup>

All of these policies made perfect sense to Marxist theorists, but they were utterly impractical in the concrete conditions of Shaanxi. As Li Zizhou had pointed out in 1927, land was relatively plentiful in Shaanxi, and peasants needed less taxes, not more land. Especially after the 1928–29 famine reduced the population and forced many to abandon their homes and fields, the party-promoted land revolution had little appeal. One local party committee dared to report that with warlord exactions increasing the tax burden, “For peasants, land brings harm, not benefit.”<sup>107</sup> The injunction to focus on Xi’an and the Wei River core was equally impractical. Guerrillas fled to the mountains precisely because they could survive there.

In November 1930, the political situation in Shaanxi took another turn that, in the short term, posed a problem for the Communist Party. Yang Hucheng returned as governor, restoring rule by a Shaanxi militarist and a man with a simple background (some called him a former bandit) and a relatively progressive reputation. He reduced taxes and brought a more liberal policy toward his Shaanxi allies of the 1920s, releasing many leftists and Communists from prison.<sup>108</sup> By the following spring, the drought had ended, grain prices had fallen, banditry had “largely disappeared” in the Wei River heartland, and Yang Hucheng’s efforts to develop the local economy with canal building and other reforms convinced many that the revolutionary moment had passed. Party members who shared these sentiments were accused of reformism, opportunism, and violation of the International line, and many were expelled.<sup>109</sup> Other simply abandoned the party, succumbing to defeatism and persistent financial difficulties as the arrest of couriers left the local party strapped for funds.<sup>110</sup> With dogmatism dominating the party, most of those released from jail did not return to the CCP (which was always suspicious of members released from prison) but joined other former Communists in competing parties, especially the Trotskyites or the Third Party, which became even more important as the anti-Japanese movement gained momentum after 1931.<sup>111</sup>

On September 18, 1931, the Japanese launched the operation that would soon result in the occupation of Manchuria and the creation of the puppet state of Manchukuo (满洲国) under the deposed Qing emperor, Puyi. This marked the latest stage of Japanese aggression against China, a process that progressively encroached on Chinese territory in North China and ultimately sparked full-scale invasion and war in 1937. Chiang Kai-shek knew that his armies were still unprepared to confront Japan, so he ordered withdrawal from the Northeast (Manchuria) and followed a policy of “trading space for time” as he built up his armies and military industries, preparing for the war to come. Public impatience with Chiang’s perceived appeasement of Japan grew over time, and by the mid-1930s leftists and Communists joined and benefited from this criticism. Accordingly, a narrative has developed in histories of the 1930s that Japanese aggression gradually weakened the Nationalists and strengthened the political position of the Chinese Communists.<sup>112</sup> It is important to recognize, however, that this process did not begin until well after the Manchurian Incident. In late 1931 and 1932, the Communists found themselves lagging behind in the patriotic movement.

The problem derived from the party’s obligatory deference to the policies of the Comintern and the Soviet Union. In 1932, the Comintern held that *all* the imperialist powers were threatening China, not just Japan. For this reason the guerrilla group in Shaanbei was called the Anti-Imperialist (*fandi*反帝) Alliance, not the Resist-Japan (*Kang-Ri*抗日) Alliance, as some would later call it.<sup>113</sup> The party’s insistence on anti-imperialism rather than resistance to Japan sometimes led it to oppose the patriotic movement against Japan, calling on party activists to “absolutely

oppose the Anti-Japan Society carrying out exclusively anti-Japanese struggles” and arguing that protests directed only at Japan amounted to “surrendering to the gentry strongmen and capitalists of the Nationalist Party.”<sup>114</sup> In the party’s reports and propaganda, Japan’s aggression in Manchuria was a threat not so much to China as to the socialist motherland in the USSR. Accordingly, local cadres were endlessly enjoined to mobilize the working masses for the “armed defense of the Soviet Union.”<sup>115</sup> Needless to say, with Japan occupying a large and strategic swath of Chinese territory, the party gained little political support with calls to defend the Soviet Union. This was particularly true as the Soviet Union vigorously defended its interest in the Chinese-Eastern Railroad (CERR) that crossed northern Manchuria to link Vladivostok to the Trans-Siberian Railroad. Soviet defense of the CERR first became an issue in 1929, when the Nationalist Party launched a campaign for its recovery and the Soviets sent troops to defend it.<sup>116</sup> Once the Japanese occupied the area, the Russians started negotiating with Japan. In the dispute over the CERR, the Soviets squandered much of their early reputation as anti-imperialist defenders of China and were instead accused of acting like “Red imperialists.”<sup>117</sup> The CCP’s complicity in this Soviet policy undermined its own anti-imperialist credentials.

As a result of these policies, the party missed the opportunity to lead the patriotic movement against Japan following the Manchurian Incident. Inner-party documents betray extraordinary concern over the growing influence of the Third Party and so-called “Trotskyites”—both dominated by former Communists—especially among patriotic students and intellectuals.<sup>118</sup> Of course, the party labeled any former Communist or leftist who deviated from Stalin’s orthodoxy of building socialism in one country a “Trotskyite,” so the actual strength of genuine followers of Trotsky’s Fourth International is difficult to judge. It is clear, however, that the influence of these groups was significantly enhanced when CCP founder Chen Duxiu broke with the party over its defense of the Soviet Union on the Chinese-Eastern Railroad issue and began to affiliate with the Trotskyites.<sup>119</sup> These leftist groups and the Nationalist Party took the lead in the anti-Japanese movement, and the Shaanxi party admitted that “in the anti-Japanese movement after the Manchurian Incident, [the party] has become completely the tail of the petty bourgeoisie, or even behind the tail.” Comparing its work against that of the Nationalist Party and the Trotskyites, it confessed that “the political influence of the party lags behind that of the counter-revolution.”<sup>120</sup> In the spring of 1932, the party organized violent demonstrations protesting the visit of the Nationalist Party leader Dai Jitao to Xi’an. When several students were beaten by the police, the party called it a “massacre,” but the feeble local response only demonstrated the limited appeal of Communist propaganda.<sup>121</sup> These reports remind us that the Communist Party was becoming a decidedly marginal force in the cities of North China, where long-forgotten competitors were often more effective critics of Nationalist Party rule.

In the first years of the decade, the central figure in the Shaanxi party was Du Heng, a young intellectual from the northern Shaanxi county of Jia-xian. A former student of Suide Normal School, Du had joined the Communist Youth League in 1924 and the party soon thereafter. He served briefly as a special representative to Shaanbei, then held a variety of posts with the Xi'an party apparatus from 1930, rising to the secretary position in 1932 at the age of twenty-five. An able debater, he was adept at party jargon and a strong advocate of leftist activism to replace the moderate "bookish" style of the 1920s.<sup>122</sup> The Center, however, was never satisfied with the local leadership, and in 1932 and 1933 it twice dispatched outsiders to direct operations.<sup>123</sup> One of those sent was unhappy in his new post, repeatedly asking reassignment for personal reasons, and was finally expelled.<sup>124</sup> The other was arrested and defected in 1933 along with Du Heng in an incident discussed below. Several retrospective analyses attribute the leaders' problems to their unhappy sex lives: they were separated from their wives and apparently preying on younger female comrades.<sup>125</sup> Obviously, this was not a strong leadership group. Du Heng remained the central figure, however, and in June 1932 it was he who attended a critical Shanghai meeting of provincial representatives from North China. There they debated policies to overcome the myth of "northern backwardness" and devise a strategy for the next stage of revolution in the north.

The Shanghai meeting was attended by six North China representatives, plus two members of the new party leadership from the "Internationalist" group of returned students from Moscow—Zhang Wentian and Qin Bangxian, also known as Bo Gu.<sup>126</sup> The mandate of the meeting was premised on the Communist International's line that in the context of world economic crisis, the imperialist powers were preparing to attack the Soviet socialist motherland. China's Nationalist Party was aiding this conspiracy by selling out Manchuria and developing Shaanxi and the Northwest as "steps toward the invasion of the Soviet Union." Calls by patriotic opponents of the Nanjing government to break relations with Japan, declare war, or boycott Japanese goods were but a smokescreen to support Nationalist capitulation. Even non-Communist leftists who urged the government to end the Guomindang's one-party rule, restore relations with the Soviet Union, and permit open activity by the Communist Party were denounced as "supporters of the slavish administration of the imperialist Guomindang" and "the most dangerous enemies of the revolution."<sup>127</sup> All of this was supported by language adopted from Stalin's struggles against Trotsky, in which divisions within the party were characterized as a two-line struggle between a correct line and a "right opportunist" deviation.<sup>128</sup>

The meeting did nothing to change party policy in Shaanxi, but it certainly enhanced Du Heng's ability to speak on behalf of the Center and push the new left line. The meeting reinforced the idea that a "firm class line" and proletarian leadership were essential to the revolution's success, so the party should focus on poor peasants and agricultural laborers in the countryside and promote strikes in the cities, seeking ways to recruit workers into the newly formed Red Army

units. It also called on the guerrillas to develop their capacity for plains warfare, in support of which a soviet should be established north of the Wei, centered on the old rural base in Sanyuan.<sup>129</sup>

#### SANYUAN AND THE NORTH WEI BASE

A key test of this strategy would come as the party sought to rebuild its old base in Sanyuan and organize a soviet in the surrounding area north of the Wei River. As we have seen, Sanyuan was an important cultural center, and teachers and students from its many schools had been instrumental in organizing peasant associations during the National Revolution of the 1920s. That movement had been protected and often led by enlightened gentry and rich peasant families, and their influence continued in the 1930s.<sup>130</sup> One area where the party had success and managed to maintain a foothold following the end of the united front was the Wuzi district (武字区), a relatively isolated area on an elevated plain in the northeast of the county, bordering Fuping. The Wuzi district was home to the locally prominent Huang family, whose patriarch had been a Revolutionary Alliance member during the 1911 Revolution and a friend of Yu Youren. The large family owned over three hundred *mu* of land and included the brothers Huang Ziwen and Huang Zixiang, both of whom joined the Communist Party. In 1928, Huang Ziwen mobilized the old peasant association networks in a *jiaonong* protest, leading tens of thousands of peasants to the county seat to oppose oppressive taxes. The protest was peaceful, but it was followed by attacks on tax collectors, several of whom were killed. During the famine of 1929–30, the brothers organized a relief committee (*chouzhen weiyuanhui* 筹赈委员会), donating grain and then forcing other wealthy families to do the same. Peasants saw this as a natural extension of traditional gentry charity in times of famine, but the authorities thought otherwise. The Huang brothers were arrested, released only after their mother sold 150 *mu* of family property to purchase their freedom.<sup>131</sup> At this point, Huang Ziwen fled to Beijing, then Shanxi, where he joined the guerrilla band that Yan Hongyan led back to Shaanbei in 1930. Local Communist organizing continued to emphasize famine relief, with a Famine Victims Rescue Team (Zaimin zijiudui 灾民自救队), but its activities were increasingly violent, with assassinations of tax collectors and wealthy landlords, even the abduction and execution of a county magistrate passing through the area.<sup>132</sup> By the end of 1931, Huang Ziwen was back in Sanyuan, this time organizing local schoolteachers and students in demonstrations against the Japanese occupation of Manchuria.<sup>133</sup>

The revolutionary efforts of the Communists in Sanyuan were clearly having some success. The leaders came from influential local families and combined appeals to poor peasants suffering from the famine with patriotic appeals targeting students. In 1932, Huang Ziwen headed the revolutionary committee that controlled the area. The local peasants saw him as the source of authority and went to

him with all their problems—even treating him with the special courtesy of wheat flour when he was invited for a meal. “It became a personal government . . . The reason for this is that Ziwen has been responsible for Sanyuan and the guerrillas. All along it has been a paternalistic system.”<sup>134</sup> Huang himself admitted that “the great majority of cadres are rich peasants” and that they were able to influence the party’s work. Party cells were organized by village and often dominated by a single family.<sup>135</sup> When the Bolsheviks in the provincial party insisted on greater representation from poor peasants, the county committee appointed a committee member’s tenant as party secretary.<sup>136</sup> It seems quite clear that the rural party of Sanyuan was built upon existing structures of local power, which allowed it to sink roots and grow but limited its ability to transform society. This was not a situation that the provincial party was prepared to tolerate.

To break the local power structures, provincial representatives were dispatched to enforce the party’s class line and institute a level of Bolshevik discipline. The party established separate unions for poor peasants and agricultural laborers, but it was unclear who was to lead these, and confusion and differences within the party ensued. The women’s organization brought consequences that the party was unprepared for. Young women fled to the Wuzi district to escape unwanted marriages, then started pursuing young men among the guerrillas, offering to cook and sew for them.<sup>137</sup> An outside cadre from Guangdong was sent to bring order, but he had difficulty communicating in the local dialect and proved ineffective.<sup>138</sup> The most basic problem was the peasants’ enthusiasm for tax reduction and grain distribution in a time of poor harvests, but not for land redistribution. In the party’s eyes, this was simply because the Sanyuan party was dominated by wealthy peasants pursuing an erroneous “rich peasant line.”<sup>139</sup> The provincial authorities could not accept that land redistribution exposed peasants to retaliation if landlords returned and the party was unable to protect them, while grain distribution met immediate needs and was readily justified as a more coercive version of established norms of local elite charity.

As the struggle intensified, a greater problem arose as the party sought to control the guerrilla bands it had organized. Armed groups had been assassinating tax collectors and forcing the wealthy to distribute grain at least since 1930. Some turned to banditry, which the party attempted to control, without success.<sup>140</sup> When the party organized guerrillas, it was largely these same groups. Many were family-based bands of brothers, cousins, and uncles who would rotate in and out of active membership so that members could tend the family’s fields.<sup>141</sup> Some had attended school together, and the party used classmate connections to mobilize them.<sup>142</sup> One rich peasant and shopkeeper led a bandit group that worked for the party for a time, then quit when he was criticized.<sup>143</sup> The party’s biggest problem was its most powerful local gang, a family operation from a village along the Fuping border whose leader came to be known as Sun the Imperialist (Sun Diguó 孙帝国). Sun and his brothers had been active in the peasant association since the

National Revolution period of the 1920s. In the early 1930s, the Sun and Huang brothers dominated both the Wuzi district and the Sanyuan County party committees.<sup>144</sup> The Sun family controlled the most powerful and best-armed gang in the district, but the Imperialist openly opposed land reform. He was also cautious in protecting his forces. When the army and local militia attacked the soviet in the fall of 1932, young activists in the Red Guards (Chiweidui) and Young Pioneers (Shaonian xianfengdui) were eager to resist, but “the guerrillas led by ‘the Imperialist’ cursed the masses and did not let them assemble: ‘We have guns and still don’t dare fight. You’ve only got sticks. What are you going to do?’” Later the Imperialist turned against the party’s operations: driving off a guerrilla force sent from the Red Army and dispersing a meeting called to announce the land revolution, ripping up the revolutionary slogans pasted on walls. Activists “cursed ‘the Imperialist’ as the emperor of Wuzi district.” Some in the party called for Sun’s elimination, but others temporized.<sup>145</sup> Sun’s guerrillas were the local party’s best fighters, and as one report acknowledged, the party was faced with the choice between good fighters or good class composition.<sup>146</sup>

By the fall of 1932, the Sanyuan effort had descended into hopeless disarray. The county committee was at odds with the rural party, frustrated by the latter’s resistance to land reform but ignorant of the facts on the ground.<sup>147</sup> Young activists were angry at the caution of their elders in the party, as a result of which “comrades of the Communist Youth League despise the party. Many league comrades and young people say only the young can get things done; the adults are worthless. This has created an opposition between the party and the league, between old and young.”<sup>148</sup> In the fall, the clueless Bolsheviks running the party insisted on a major celebration of Russia’s October Revolution, an act of questionable meaning to peasants of the district. This provoked the government into a determined military effort to eliminate the new soviet, which was accomplished within a few weeks. The youth in the Red Guards were prepared to resist but had no effective weapons. Sun the Imperialist had the best weapons, but he chose not to fight.<sup>149</sup> The remaining activists resorted to coercive grain distribution and assassinations of gentry strongmen, landlords, and tax collectors. These raids were usually made outside one’s home base, with the result that the locals’ guerrilla bands were bandits in the eyes of others.<sup>150</sup>

By this time, the Imperialist was convinced that the party had deceived him and turned against the revolution, inventing a new term to describe the party’s doctrine, not Communism but “con-ism” (*rinong-zhuyi* 日弄主义). “The Communist Party is ‘con-ism,’” his fighters said. “The party asked us to work for them, and when we did, they expelled us. We’re not going to be their slaves.” Sun’s gang was a brotherhood, both blood brothers and sworn brothers. They believed in revenge, and now they were prepared to seek revenge against those in the party who had targeted them. Some former Communists joined them, informing on their comrades. Many peasants adopted their language: “The masses inform the enemy. They

say, "The Communists are con-ism."<sup>151</sup> As the former Communist allies combined with local militia to eliminate revolutionaries, the result was a terrible bloodbath. Later accounts claim that as many as three to four hundred peasants were killed.<sup>152</sup>

Obedient to the line of the Comintern and the Center, the Shaanxi provincial committee sought to build a revolutionary movement near the urban centers of the province. To do this, they needed to draw the guerrillas from their mountain strongholds onto the plains of the Wei River valley. Sanyuan provided the best hope to accomplish this strategy, for it had a student-fueled movement that had sunk roots in the poorer northern section of the county. The problem was, the leadership of that movement was overwhelmingly wealthy peasants and landlords, and the armed militia and gangs that could provide a fighting force were controlled by locally prominent families. When the party pressed for land reform and a soviet government, they met determined resistance. The North Wei Soviet collapsed, and the best the local party could propose was to use "Bolshevik spirit and Stalinist methods" to carry out the directives of their superiors.<sup>153</sup>

#### RISE OF THE TWENTY-SIXTH RED ARMY

Following the January 1932 Sanjiayuan incident, with the execution of Zhao Erwa and the defections that followed, Liu Zhidan was sent to Xi'an, and Xie Zichang assumed command of the guerrilla force. Given the minimal military threat posed by this much-reduced rebel army, it was rarely challenged by the regular army. Their adversaries were small local garrisons and militia. Most of their operations were small-scale night or dawn attacks lasting at most a few hours and involving only several dozen men. In Xunyi County, a major area of guerrilla operations in the hills north of the Wei, the local army garrison was commanded by an underground Communist, Zhang Hanmin, who arranged mock battles with the guerrillas to keep up appearances. Other Communists in his unit supplied the guerrillas with weapons in exchange for stolen draft animals.<sup>154</sup> On the rare occasions when the guerrillas attempted attacks on walled towns, the results could be disastrous. The seat of Zhengning County, across the border in Gansu, was the walled town of Shanhe (山河镇). The exactions of the local authorities in a time of famine had aroused local peasant opposition. Though the local militia was apparently led by rich peasants, the Red Army sought to combine with it to overrun the town. The locals had no firearms, only swords and spears, and they led the attack. But a defector sneaked into the town to warn the defenders, and this and a second attack were beaten back with heavy casualties to both the militia and the Red Army.<sup>155</sup> Xie Zichang was blamed for the failed attack, and the provincial party dispatched him to Gansu to organize again within the warlord armies. Liu Zhidan resumed command of the Shaan-Gan guerrillas.<sup>156</sup>

In the summer of 1932, Liu Zhidan and Huang Ziwen, the Sanyuan leader who had joined Yan Hongyan's Shanxi band, issued a proclamation declaring the newly formed Shaan-Gan Red Army to be "the armed force of the poor workers and

peasants, under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party.” It pledged to eliminate taxes; redistribute grain, property, and land; void all loan deeds; and establish a soviet regime.<sup>157</sup> Judging from its actions, the emphasis was on the first two of these tasks: blocking tax collection and redistributing grain. Despite an earlier claim of one thousand men, this new Red Army unit had only three companies, each with about ninety men with seventy to eighty guns.<sup>158</sup> With loose control of at most seventy villages along the Shaanxi-Gansu border, their activities mainly involved night attacks and kidnapping.<sup>159</sup>

Kidnapping wealthy landowners was a critical source of revenue, and one local cadre recalled the procedure: “To solve the problem of operating expenses, the guerrillas would go out to get some movable property. We would seize and hold a gentry strongman or landlord and let his family get money to ransom him. At that time, the people’s voice was decisive. If the people said this guy had a good reputation, we would release him after we got the money; if the people said he was bad, we would take the money and then kill him.”<sup>160</sup> To gain popular support, the guerrillas distributed grain seized from local landlords, but even this could be problematic: peasants were unwilling to take grain from fellow villagers and feared reprisals once the Red Army moved on.<sup>161</sup> There is little doubt that to many the guerrillas seemed indistinguishable from bandits: “The fighters wanted grain, and their selfish attitude was pronounced. They thought that if they joined the Red Army they would get clothes and things and make money.”<sup>162</sup> Veterans of this force would later admit that at this time the guerrillas had “the odor of bandits.”<sup>163</sup>

Some local brigands posed as Red Army guerrillas, making it even more difficult to tell Communist “bandits” from the real ones.<sup>164</sup> According to one contemporary account, “Under the guerrilla headquarters there were over ten guerrilla units. What were these units? They were all reorganized bandits with certificates of appointment. Whoever came was given a certificate and appointed as guerrilla detachment number X. So even though there were supposed to be ten-plus detachments, some had never even been seen by the headquarters. These bandit groups used our red flag to extort from the masses, rape, and steal. People called them the ‘bogus Red Army.’”<sup>165</sup>

Despite such criticism from the provincial committee, its representative, Gao Weihai, a Moscow-returned cadre, temporized on the question of purging bandits and improving the class composition of the guerrillas.<sup>166</sup> In response, the committee, led by Du Heng, turned on Gao, accusing him of opportunism and resisting the new International line. Significantly, part of Gao’s error was appealing to the example of Mao Zedong on Jinggangshan—now regarded as a classic model of peasant revolutionary organizing but in 1932 criticized as inappropriate for the new task of organizing a soviet. “In his own words, he is ‘using Mao Zedong’s guerrilla tactics on Jinggangshan to understand the present task of establishing a soviet.’ He completely fails to understand that in the current conditions of sharp revolutionary advance, tactics that were correct in the past are no longer appropriate.”<sup>167</sup> An appeal to Mao’s writings was not yet the correct answer to all questions of revolutionary strategy.

The provincial committee wanted armed struggle in the Wei River valley and believed that the mass movement there could correct the guerrillas' preference for kidnapping and hit-and-run warfare in the hills.<sup>168</sup> Accordingly, Huang Ziwen and some of the guerrillas left to support the peasant movement in Sanyuan, but that only brought the grievous consequences described above. Another unit was dispatched even further east, to Hancheng, where there was even less local party support, and the result was another defeat and further losses for the Red Army. More importantly, the popular reaction was not favorable. According to a contemporary report, the rich called them "bandits, no good," the poor said, "What? They go and leave us?" and the general public said, "They did not share [*gong* 共] well. Real communism is not so great! . . . The peasants got cheated. They took the good things and the money, and we paid the price."<sup>169</sup>

These setbacks exacerbated tensions between the guerrillas and the provincial committee. Following the June 1932 Shanghai meeting of North China provincial secretaries, there was growing pressure for proletarian leadership, enhanced class struggle, and carrying the revolution to Shaanxi's population centers with plains warfare in the Wei River valley. To carry out this ambitious offensive strategy, the guerrillas were reorganized as the Twenty-Sixth Red Army.<sup>170</sup> A representative, Li Gen, was sent from Xi'an to lead the guerrillas on the correct path. That involved moving beyond roving attacks on the wealthy to establish a stable soviet. This, however, led to heavy losses after what was later described as an erroneous policy of "defending to the death" (*sishou zhengce* 死守政策). When the guerrilla leaders turned on him, Li Gen treated it as a "counter-revolutionary conspiracy" and tried to organize opposition among more pliant guerrillas, but this too failed, and after three weeks he was forced to abandon work with the guerrillas and return to Xi'an, where his colleagues subjected him to relentless criticism for his failure.<sup>171</sup>

Gao Gang was the next provincial representative sent to carry out the new line. A native of Shaanbei's Hengshan County and graduate of Yulin Middle School, Gao would rise through the Shaanxi party to become its most important leader in the wartime period. Favored by Mao in the early 1950s, he would fall out with the party leadership in 1953, leading to his purge and suicide. That ignominious end to Gao's career would taint all subsequent accounts of his role in Shaanxi's revolutionary history.<sup>172</sup> In the 1940s, Gao Gang would tie himself closely to Liu Zhidan's wing of the party, but in 1932 he clearly represented the Bolsheviks in the provincial committee. In a report that targeted both Xie Zichang (who had rejoined the guerrillas in the summer but was now identified as a "class enemy") and Liu Zhidan, identified as a "bandit, student, rich peasant," Gao wrote that "the guerrillas were created when comrades with a fuzzy understanding of class used kidnapping as a method to raise money and buy guns; they did not rise through the process of class struggle. . . . Most of the masses who joined were bandits or opium-dealing hooligans." The political officers failed to engage in political education, and there was no "military core" controlled by the party. The guerrilla leaders openly resisted the provincial committee's strategy, saying, "If we follow the provincial committee

line our troops will all be lost." This then developed into a debate over moving to safer ground further north or following the party representatives and seeking to expand southward into the Wei River valley. According to Gao Gang's report, "these northern bastards" wanted to shoot the provincial delegate (Gao Weihai), which helps explain why he temporized on purging them. They "publicly curse Li Gen [who, as we have seen, took an even harder line] as a son of a bitch and say the provincial line is incorrect. This is their counter-revolutionary plot to seize power." His conclusion was blunt: "To carry out the Bolshevik line, we must thoroughly purge these guys."<sup>173</sup>

In the end, the band split. Huang Ziwen, under criticism for "rich peasant" errors, led his Sanyuan fighters back to their home base, while Liu and Xie launched an assault on Bao'an. Xie Zichang, at least in the eyes of the provincial committee, led the operation. "Among the guerrillas, Xie XX openly expressed the opinion that he was oppressed by the provincial committee, leading to the loss of several men. Now he was going to 'carry out dictatorship' and operate on his own, sending off the better cadres to return to the provincial committee. He said the only way to solve the guerrillas' problems was to get rid of these comrades. Zichang and Yan Hongyan then took the central group of the guerrilla cavalry to Bao'an and Fuzhou, the old bandit lair, returning to their old bandit livelihood."<sup>174</sup>

Xie and Yan's Bao'an attack failed miserably. Heavy casualties had a significant impact on morale, and many fighters departed or defected.<sup>175</sup> By early 1933, the survivors again regrouped on the Shaanxi-Gansu border.<sup>176</sup> At this time, the Twenty-Sixth Red Army had been reduced to 160–70 men, thirty to forty horses, and about one hundred guns.<sup>177</sup> Du Heng, after returning from Shanghai in mid-1932 with fresh instructions and the full authority of the party Center, was reassigned from his position as provincial secretary to political commissar of the Twenty-Sixth Army. By this time, Xie Zichang and Yan Hongyan had been accused of a "counter-revolutionary conspiracy," and the party was determined to assert firm control of the gun.<sup>178</sup>

Du Heng was a skillful debater, a master of party jargon. He came with the full authority of the Center and a mandate from the province to dissolve the Twenty-Sixth Army if necessary.<sup>179</sup> But he was only twenty-six years old and spoke with the thick Shaanbei accent of his native Jia-xian as he expounded on the lessons of the Zhang Guotao's Hubei-Henan-Anhui Soviet and the need for firm proletarian leadership. One veteran guerrilla recalled Du's message to be "There is no Marxism in the remote mountains."<sup>180</sup> It was not a particularly effective speech for an audience of hardened guerrilla survivors.<sup>181</sup> Du vowed to carry out "the line of the Communist International and the CCP Center . . . to achieve the final victory of the Chinese soviet revolution and the world revolution."<sup>182</sup> This was an ambitious goal for a ragtag group of 170 men.

Even more problematic was his plan for the Twenty-Sixth Army. The party had long criticized the personalized leadership of the guerrilla forces. Now they were again accused of right opportunism and avoidance of true revolutionary struggle

through flight to the mountains. The military commanders were allowed to make a self-criticism, which showed that they were not counter-revolutionaries, and then Du carried out his reorganization. He wanted to follow Gao's recommendation and remove all of the guerrilla leaders, but Xie Zichang and Yan Hongyan were now the clear targets, having openly defied the Xi'an committee. They were sent to Shanghai for reeducation while Liu Zhidan, with his characteristic obedience to higher authority and firm support from the guerrillas, was kept on in a reduced capacity.<sup>183</sup> These three were relatively lucky: the former commissar Zheng Yi, who was accused of collaborating with the enemy, was executed.<sup>184</sup> Wang Shitai, a former student of Yan'an Middle School and loyal follower of Liu Zhidan, was named commander of the Twenty-Sixth Army with Du Heng as political commissar.<sup>185</sup>

By the spring of 1933, the main base of the Twenty-Sixth Army was centered in Zhaojin, a town in the west of Yao-xian. The population included many recent famine refugees, two hundred thousand according to one account, and with land already held in large plots by established families, this produced relatively fertile conditions for class-based appeals. The local guerrillas included the usual complement of local thugs and bandits.<sup>186</sup> There was adequate grain to support the army for a time, but after a while the army supported itself by raiding outside, "fighting on external lines" in the usual euphemism,<sup>187</sup> and the hilly wooded topography made the base relatively easy to defend. The most defensible stronghold was Xuejiazhai, a tall sandstone outcropping near Zhaojin, which became the military headquarters, site of a holding cell for kidnapped victims, a primitive hospital, and a small machine shop staffed by skilled workers recruited from the government arsenal in Xi'an (figure 6). Du Heng was especially pleased by the financial resources that the Twenty-Sixth Army had accumulated. The cavalry had twenty bags of opium, some one thousand ounces. With this, Du reported, "The financial problem can be solved. . . . I plan to give it all to the [provincial] standing committee for its expenses," with some to be allocated for medicine and equipment for the Twenty-Sixth Army.<sup>188</sup> As always, Du Heng was thinking first of the party organization. For him, an important function of the guerrillas was to finance the provincial party, supplementing the meagre subsidy that it received from Shanghai.

Zhaojin saw the brief appearance of a somewhat functional soviet regime. Technically the North Wei Soviet in Sanyuan preceded it, but as we have seen, that was a brief and chaotic episode in Shaanxi's revolutionary history. In Zhaojin, there was a revolutionary committee headed by a local peasant—an obligatory feature under the prevailing class line—but with Xi Zhongxun as his deputy, the first important post for this future party leader.<sup>189</sup> The party called for three thousand peasant recruits from Sanyuan, to provide an alternative to reliance on bandits, but Sanyuan cadres vigorously opposed this depletion of their forces, and nothing close to that number was ever achieved.<sup>190</sup> The primitive conditions in which the soviet operated are reflected in Du Heng's list of needs in January 1933: political and military cadres, skilled workers, doctors, pens, ink, and diaries.<sup>191</sup> The medical needs were particularly serious: wounded soldiers were treated by a local veterinarian



FIGURE 6. Xuejiazhai. Mountain fort of the Zhaojin Soviet. (Photo by author, 2016.)

who had only opium to use as anesthetic. Only critical officers were sent secretly to Xi'an for treatment in a modern hospital.<sup>192</sup> Still, there is evidence that the guerrilla forces had reasonable control of this isolated border district, and the party was making its first tentative steps toward establishing a new local order.

Predictably, this progress was soon threatened by new leftist errors. It is conventional to blame these errors on Du Heng, but he was constantly under pressure from the provincial committee, which in turn responded to the leftist line of the party Center.<sup>193</sup> Still, some of grievous decisions were certainly Du's own. He called for an attack on a local militia leader with whom the guerrillas had tacitly cooperated—even receiving arms from his forces.<sup>194</sup> The attack failed, with major losses to the guerrillas. Du himself admitted that “I absolutely do not understand military affairs. . . . My prestige among the fighters has been diminished.”<sup>195</sup> He also offended local religious sensibilities by ordering his men to burn down a large local monastery. The monastery was a major local landowner, and its large store of grain had already been confiscated. Burning it down was defended on military grounds but was not welcomed by the local population.<sup>196</sup>

These actions weakened the guerrilla forces, but there was worse to come. All along, Du Heng and the party leadership had chafed against the guerrillas' military tactics of small-scale raids from mountain strongholds. The June 1932 meeting with the party Center had called for attacks on the more populous plains. The first attempt at this in Sanyuan had been unsuccessful. Now Du Heng presented even more radical plans. He first proposed that the guerrillas open up an international link by fighting through to the Soviet border, but this was quickly rejected as a

foolhardy plan for an ill-armed local force of several hundred fighters.<sup>197</sup> He then proposed crossing the Wei River to establish a new base in the Weinan-Hua-xian (Wei-Hua) area east of Xi'an, where some of the earliest Communist cells had operated in the 1920s. Liu Zhidan and the other guerrilla commanders were skeptical, but Du was the army's political commissar, and his view prevailed. This was a rich area with a dense population and an established underground party base. In addition, the Fourth Red Army from the collapsing Hubei-Henan-Anhui (Eyuwan 鄂豫皖) Soviet was then retreating through southern Shaanxi in what party documents consistently called a "victorious advance." Against all evidence, Du Heng insisted that this created the "objective conditions for an uprising" in Shaanxi. The concern that the Wei-Hua area also had powerful local elites and was close to the center of provincial military power was dismissed as reflecting the "flightism" that had long afflicted guerrillas fighting and hiding in the hills.<sup>198</sup>

Such an aggressive military action naturally required money, arms, and provisions, and here the guerrillas turned to the same sort of local elite allies that had caused such trouble in Sanyuan. South of Zhaojin was a small guerrilla force led by Miao Jiexiang, son of a wealthy and well-connected landlord family in the poor northern hills, who had joined the party as a student in 1927, during the heady days of the united front. After a checkered career including service as an aide to the warlord governor Yang Hucheng, in 1933 he was back organizing friends into a small guerrilla band. Though lauded today as a revolutionary martyr, in 1933 he was fashionably dressed, always wearing dark glasses, smoking opium in the evening with his buddies, and described in the press as a "notorious criminal."<sup>199</sup> Soon a plan was hatched to kidnap a Norwegian engineer working on a new canal for the China International Famine Relief Commission. In May 1933, Miao's small band of ordinary peasants with red scarves around their waists and hammer-and-sickle emblems sewn onto their sleeves seized Eliassen and his aide. The captives were taken into the hills, where they were joined by some four hundred soldiers, mostly teenagers, of the Twenty-Sixth Army. Eliassen described them as well fed and dressed in padded uniforms but poorly armed: most had only "old muzzle-loaders, a sprinkling sported up-to-date rifles, and quite a number had only a sword stuck into the bandolier." For the ransom of the engineer and his aide, the guerrillas demanded CH\$200,000, 120 rifles with 120 cartridges each, thirty-six machine guns with ammunition, five thousand sacks of grain, and four wireless transmitters. Though the escape of Eliassen and his aide aborted the delivery of most of this material, it seems clear that Liu Zhidan's band had allied itself with a questionable group of local toughs who, perhaps betting on Miao's prior connection to Yang Hucheng, promised to supply the arms and communication equipment for a major military action.<sup>200</sup>

In June 1933, Liu Zhidan led about three hundred men dressed as regular army soldiers in a daring crossing of the Wei River east of Xi'an. With seventy to eighty horses, several dozen mules, and an ample supply of weapons and ammunition (suggesting that some of the ransom may have been paid), they managed to hijack several trucks and headed for the foothills of the Qinling mountains south of

Wei-Hua. Du Heng accompanied the army as far as Sanyuan, where the provincial committee belatedly attempted to halt the advance; then Du left the army for further discussions in Xi'an.<sup>201</sup> In Wei-Hua, the Red Army was unable to locate the local party whose welcome had been promised and were instead ambushed in unfamiliar terrain by local militia and Red Spears. Their army was scattered, then hunted down in the hills and decimated. They buried their weapons, hid wherever they could, and hoped that underground comrades or sympathetic peasants would save them. The whole escapade was an unmitigated disaster. Liu Zhidan, wet and famished, hid in a mountain cave until discovered by his surviving comrades, after which a few dozen stragglers managed to escape back to Shaanbei.<sup>202</sup>

With its main military force away in the south, the soviet base in Zhaojin came under attack. The party leadership had favored Zhaojin because Yao-xian was still relatively close to targets in the Wei River valley, but this also made it more vulnerable. In July, the Zhaojin soviet was strengthened by a well-armed group of soldiers who had mutinied from the Yao-xian garrison under Wang Taiji, a former Communist and veteran of the 1928 Wei-Hua Uprising.<sup>203</sup> But this was not enough. During the summer, the government conscripted peasants to build a road into the area, then hauled in artillery to pound the Xuejiashai stronghold. In mid-October, a defector from the guerrilla forces led the enemy up a back trail and the hill was taken. The surviving defenders retreated westward into Gansu.<sup>204</sup>

Even before the fall of Xuejiashai, the Shaanxi party suffered another devastating setback—though in the end it proved a godsend to the guerrillas. After leaving his position as political commissar of the Twenty-Sixth Army, Du Heng returned to Xi'an to consult with his colleagues in the provincial party committee. There is no indication that he ever sought to rejoin the guerrillas, and by mid-July he had certainly learned the disastrous consequences of his strategy to build a new base in Wei-Hua. Meanwhile, the underground party in Xi'an was itself in peril. In May, Chiang Kai-shek's resolutely anti-Communist Nanjing regime increased its influence in Shaanxi when Nationalist Party stalwart and former Communist Shao Lizi replaced Yang Hucheng as the civilian governor of Shaanxi. As we have seen, sympathizers on Yang's staff had often helped protect the Communists. Those days were coming to a close as Shao brought a corps of CCP defectors to press Nanjing's anti-Communist crusade.<sup>205</sup> At the same time, the local CCP's foolish attempt to hold May Day demonstrations had attracted police attention to the underground party in Xi'an. During the summer, several Xi'an Communists had been arrested. While none of their comrades were exposed, the party's usual meeting places came under surveillance. On July 28, 1933, Du Heng was meeting in a Xi'an restaurant with the new secretary of the party's Shaanxi provincial committee, Yuan Yuedong, a printer and veteran of the 1925–26 Hong Kong seamen's strike whom the Center had dispatched to provide proletarian leadership for the Shaanxi party, and several colleagues including Gao Gang. The restaurant gathering was supposed to avoid police attention, but a couple of male patrons entered, sat at a nearby table, then departed. The Communists' suspicions were aroused, so Du and his comrades

cut their meeting short and left separately. Too late. Du and Yuan Yuedong were arrested, while Gao Gang and one more escaped. Yuan Yuedong soon defected and began identifying other members of the Shaanxi organization.

By September, after various forms of enhanced interrogation, Du Heng also cracked and, together with nine of his comrades, published an open letter in the Xi'an press.<sup>206</sup> Their "Declaration on Leaving the Communist Party" (*Tuoli gongdang xuanyan* 脱离共党宣言) appeared in six successive issues of the Nationalist Party's local paper, *Xijing ribao*. While reaffirming their commitment to revolution against imperialism and feudalism, they now claimed that this goal could best be achieved under the Nationalist rather than the Communist Party. "The Chinese Communist Party," they wrote, "ignores the special characteristics of China's political economy and mechanically copies the Russian Revolution in an attempt to use Marxism-Leninism to carry out [Marx's notion that] 'the workers have no fatherland [*gongren wu zuguo* 工人无祖国]; establish communism, and destroy China and the Chinese nation."<sup>207</sup> The Communists were attacked for dividing the nation by serving the Soviet Union and "Red imperialism" at a time when the greatest need was unity against Japan. Turning to Shaanxi, these urban Bolsheviks now admitted what their rural colleagues had long argued: the peasants were uninterested in land reform in a time of drought; they wanted grain and tax relief. While such forced public confessions should certainly not be taken at face value, much of the language was consistent with internal party documents. In any case, Du Heng and his colleagues gave the public a look inside a faction-ridden party that was distinctly unflattering.<sup>208</sup>

In the weeks and months after the July arrests, Du Heng and the other defectors' intimate knowledge of the party's apparatus allowed the Guomindang authorities to hunt down secret Communists throughout the province. In the Sanyuan base, Du's information convinced the authorities that the Communists' campaign of Red Terror disguised the actual weakness of the local organization, and they quickly moved to eliminate the remaining guerrillas.<sup>209</sup> According to an early 1934 party report, "Of the arrested comrades, some were sentenced to prison, some were shot . . . , and 90 percent of the rest defected and published so-called confession declarations [*zishou xuanyan* 自首宣言]. Some were forced to defect and confessions were published without their knowledge; some just wanted to save their skins; some wanted to go with their Guomindang buddies and get rich as officials."<sup>210</sup> Arrests and further defections continued into 1934, effectively ending the work of the provincial committee and the party organization in many surrounding counties. Most party members were said to have defected, and total membership was down to an estimated two to three hundred.<sup>211</sup> The urban-based Bolshevik wing of the party had collapsed. For Liu Zhidan and the surviving guerrillas in the field, this was not necessarily a bad thing: it liberated them from the impractical directives of the province and the party Center. Now they were free to pursue their own revolutionary path.<sup>212</sup>