

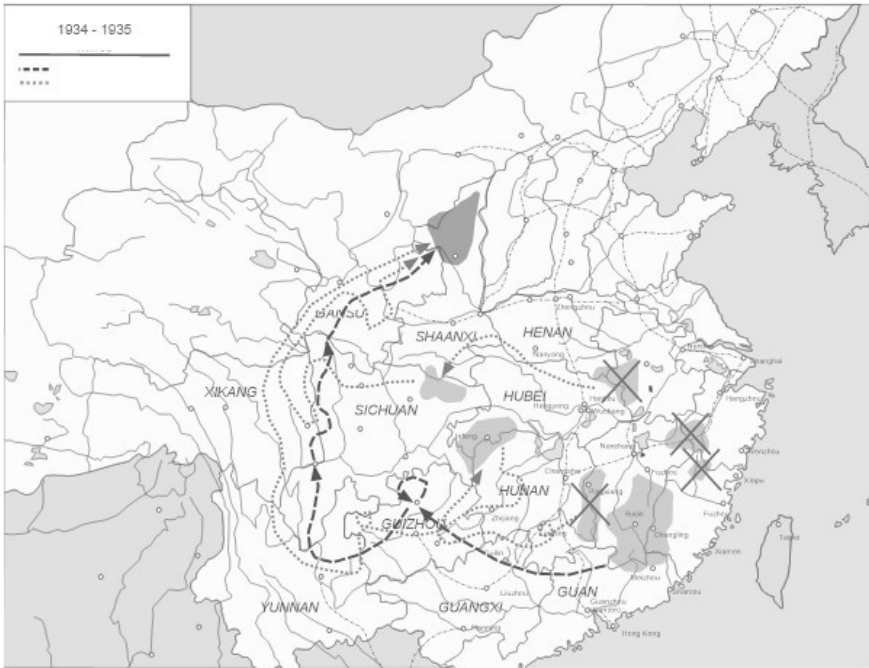
Accidental Holy Land

Xi Zhongxun, father of President Xi Jinping, was a veteran of the revolutionary movement in northern Shaanxi. In a brief essay that set the tone for virtually every official history of the Shaanbei revolution, he linked the local insurrection to the larger destiny of the Chinese Communist Party. In a torrent of mixed metaphors and party jargon, he declared that

the party organization, Red Army fighters, and popular masses of the Shaan-Gan Border Region . . . after several ups and downs, finally dispelled the dark clouds and allowed the red sun to spread its dawn light over the hills and streams of the Shaan-Gan plateau, planting the seeds of China's Northwest Soviet, creating the only base to survive the failures of the Wang Ming "left" opportunist line. [Shaanbei] would soon become the resting place for the party Center and Red Army at the end of the Long March, and the base from which the Red Army embarked to resist Japan, making a major contribution to the liberation of the Chinese masses under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party.¹

Such is the central myth of Shaanbei's place in the Chinese Revolution. Shaanbei's valiant revolutionaries built the base that harbored the party Center from October 1935 until the spring of 1948, a period that witnessed spectacular growth of the long-beleaguered revolutionary movement. During this time the Red Army increased from a small and ill-armed force of some thirteen thousand soldiers to an army of millions. Shaanbei provided the refuge from which the party marched to nationwide victory (map 6).

From early 1937, the party Center was located in Yan'an, and this entire period is treated as the Yan'an era in China's revolutionary history. This was the time when Mao rose to undisputed dominance in the party. His seminal writings on the Sinitification of Marxism, New Democracy, protracted war, art and literature, and a host of Marxist tracts on contradictions, practice, organizational problems of the party, and the mass line were all composed during this era.² In the early 1940s, Mao led an intense process of party "rectification," institutionalizing practices of criticism



MAP 6. The conventional map of the Red Army's Long March, showing arrival in a large contiguous Yan'an-based soviet in northern Shaanxi. (Source: Wikimedia.)

and self-criticism that would shape party life for decades. Out of these writings and practices would emerge an enduring Chinese revolutionary style that has been characterized as the “Yan'an Way.”³ To this day, Yan'an is revered as a “revolutionary holy land,” and the carefully restored wartime residences of the party leaders and its enormous revolutionary history museum make it a prime site for China's new Red tourism.⁴

Given the role that Yan'an played as a wartime Communist Center and the capital of the Shaan-Gan-Ning Border Region, it is important to recognize that Yan'an's prominence in China's revolutionary history came about quite by accident. With their preference for historical inevitability, China's official histories cast the story of the Shaan-Gan-Ning Border Region as the arduous building of a base that would protect the Red Army at the end of the Long March. The conventional map of the Long March ends in a well-delineated, Yan'an-centered northern Shaanxi base. But northern Shaanxi was only the last of many intended destinations of the Long March, and the scattered soviet zones of Shaanbei in 1935 looked nothing like the large compact base shown on these maps. Indeed, Liu Zhidan's soviet, with the exception of Anding, did not include a single county seat, “all of which were garrisoned by government troops.”⁵ More importantly, Mao had no intention of staying in Shaanbei, which he found too poor and sparsely populated to support

his revolutionary ambitions. It is time to explore the process whereby Shaan-Gan-Ning became the unintended terminus of the Long March, and the fundamental transformation of the Shaanbei revolution after the arrival of the party Center.

THE CENTER COMES TO SHAANBEI

The Red Army's mass withdrawal from the Central Soviet in Jiangxi was an epic tale of military retreat and political survival that left an indelible mark on the history of the Chinese Revolution. Less than one-tenth of the eighty thousand soldiers and cadres who left Jiangxi survived to the end of what is now celebrated as the Long March. The retreat was marked by desperate battles, sharp political conflicts, and grueling treks over high mountains and boggy grasslands. The mythology that grew around the survivors of the march has long shaped the history of the party.⁶ For our purposes, the critical question is how Mao's army ended up in Shaanbei. As early as 1930, Stalin had been skeptical of a soviet base near the Yangzi valley centers of Nationalist Party and imperialist power and urged the development of a base further west.⁷ By mid-1932, Zhang Guotao was forced to abandon the large Hubei-Henan-Anhui Soviet and flee toward Sichuan in the west.⁸ When Mao Zedong and his comrades were driven from the Jiangxi soviet, they first hoped to join He Long in the smaller western Hunan soviet. When this proved impossible, and after Mao's return to the party's leadership group at the Zunyi Conference of January 1935, they moved north to join Zhang Guotao's Fourth Army in Sichuan.⁹

The meeting of Mao's First Army and Zhang Guotao's Fourth Army in the summer of 1935 was one of the most fraught and fateful encounters in the history of the Communist revolution. Mao and Zhang were both senior members of the CCP, leaders since the party's founding congress in 1921, and each had ambitions to guide it in the future. As a former student at Peking University with close ties to the party's founders, a leader in the Shanghai labor movement, and a delegate to the Sixth Party Congress in Moscow, Zhang Guotao had academic and Bolshevik credentials superior to Mao's, but Mao had built the Central Soviet in Jiangxi. In 1935, Mao arrived with the support and authority of the Central Committee on his side; but Zhang Guotao commanded an army that was well rested, on its own turf, and roughly five times the size of Mao's forces. With leadership of the Chinese Revolution at stake, the two men clashed over the future direction of the march.¹⁰

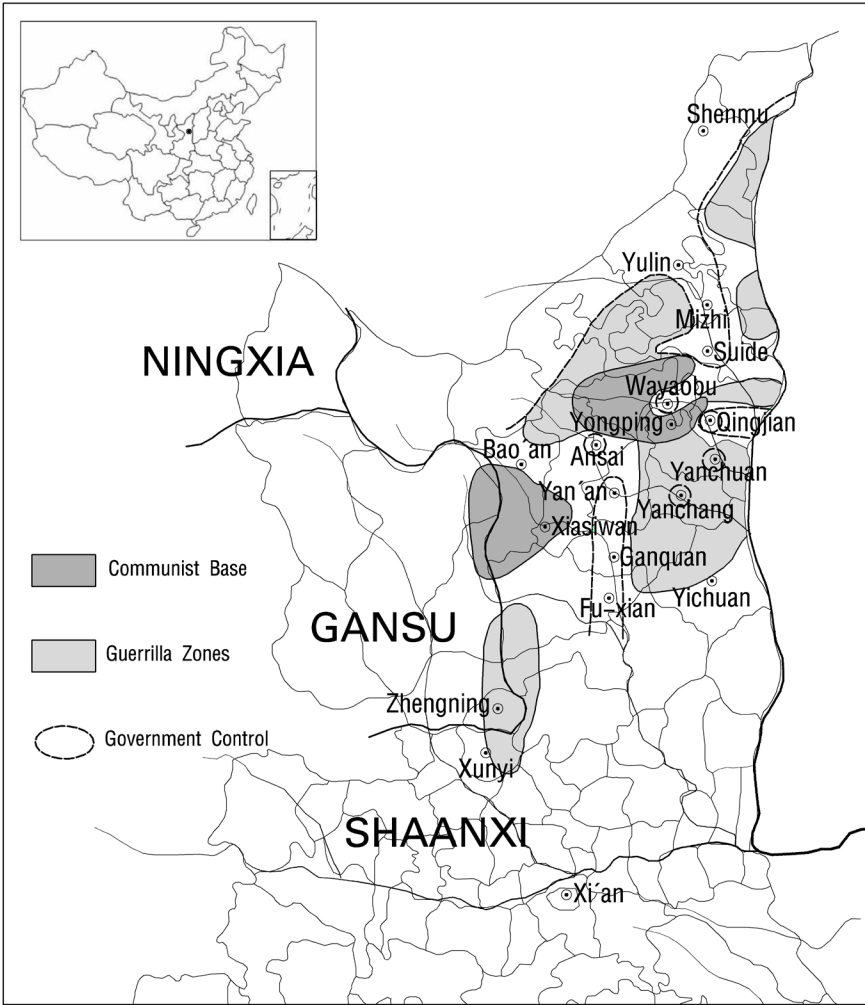
There was general agreement that the aim should be a base in Northwest China close enough to the Soviet Union so that the Red Army could receive military assistance from the socialist motherland. Soviet economic and political penetration of the far western province of Xinjiang was widely known and a key consideration.¹¹ In an August Politburo meeting, Mao argued that "the Soviet Union's influence in this area is great; we can see that from its work in Xinjiang. If we are geographically close to the Soviet Union, we can get political and material

assistance, and militarily, get airplanes and artillery, which would be very significant for the civil war in our country.” Zhang Guotao preferred a westward route through Qinghai to Xinjiang, while Mao wished to move north and east, with only a small force sent toward the “Xinjiang aircraft factory and arsenal.”¹² Zhang’s plan involved an initial move to the Tibetan areas of western Sichuan, but Mao objected that the population there was sparse, there was little grain to support the Red Army, and collecting it would involve conflicts with the local Tibetan population. Mao and his colleagues pushed for a soviet in the densely populated area of southern Gansu, along the border with Sichuan and Shaanxi.¹³ On September 10, the two armies split. Mao left his military chief, Zhu De, and a portion of the First Army with Zhang Guotao and headed north into Gansu, while Zhang soon moved south toward western Sichuan. Two days later, at a Politburo meeting in Ejie, Gansu, Mao forcefully stated his strategic goals:

At present we should engage in guerrilla struggle, fighting toward the Soviet border. This is our basic policy at present. In the past, the Center opposed this policy. After the First and Fourth Armies combined, we should have developed a soviet on the Shaanxi-Gansu-Sichuan border. Now things have changed. Now we have only the First and Third Regiment of the First Army, so we should be clear about this problem, and through guerrilla warfare, fight through to open an international connection, and with the direction and help of the International, rest and restore our military strength and increase the size of our army. . . . We absolutely reject the idea that it is wrong to seek help from others. We are a branch of the International. We can first establish a base on the Soviet border and then expand to the east. Otherwise, we will be fighting a guerrilla struggle forever.¹⁴

Had this plan in fact succeeded, the Chinese Revolution might have followed the course of North Korea, whose Communist leader Kim Il Sung raised his army in the Soviet Union.¹⁵ We can hardly imagine such a strategy from Mao. Given Mao’s enduring reputation as an advocate for the Sinification of Marxism and a uniquely Chinese form of socialism, this forthright acknowledgment that the Chinese Communist Party was but a branch of the Comintern is remarkable. However, the nature of the party in the 1930s, with its firm commitment to socialist internationalism, makes Mao’s analysis less surprising. Indeed, it fits with the general tenor of the times. Soon, however, a fateful accident would redirect the path of the march—and eventually, of the Chinese Revolution itself. A few days later, Mao read newspaper accounts of a soviet in northern Shaanxi, and, as we have seen, the Long March was steered in that direction. The First Army was renamed the Shaan-Gan Detachment of the Red Army, continued its march to the northern Shaanxi-Gansu border and in October rendezvoused with the Shaanbei revolutionaries.¹⁶

With its arrival in Shaanbei, the Center achieved some security in a region already dominated by local Communists. The Shaanbei soviet, however, was far less than the eight counties and ten half-Red counties promised in the newspaper



MAP 7. Northern Shaanxi Red bases and guerrilla zones in the fall of 1935, when Mao Zedong and Long March survivors arrived. Neither of the Communist political centers in Xiasiwan and Yongping was a county seat. (Based on *SXDSTX*, 1985, no. 12; *XBGJD*, map in front matter, pp. 246, 249, 268–80, 718–19; and author's fieldwork in 2018 and 2019.)

account. Indeed, the Communists controlled only a single county seat in Anding, their power being confined to the countryside (see map 7). Even there, as seen above, Liu Zhidan's new regime had been gravely weakened by the *sufan* campaign against "counter-revolutionaries." Indeed, when Mao and the Center arrived in Shaanbei, Liu and his closest associates were still imprisoned in Wuyaobu; Yan'an, Yulin, and all the major towns of Shaanbei were occupied by the enemy; and the Shaanbei soviet was surrounded by a massive array of Guomindang

forces. To a large degree, the fate of the Shaanbei revolution lay in the hands of the Red Army, and military considerations would dominate the next stage of the struggle. The newspaper account Mao read in Gansu reported a Communist soviet with seven hundred thousand members, two hundred thousand Red Guards, and a Red Army force of twenty thousand.¹⁷ What he discovered was surely a disappointment.

It is generally agreed that Mao Zedong's First Army left Jiangxi with about 80,000 men. Estimates of the First Army's strength when it met Zhang Guotao's Fourth Army in Sichuan vary widely, ranging from 10,000 to 30,000, with the reality probably closer to the former figure.¹⁸ There were major losses crossing the grasslands and significant casualties and desertions in the battles of southern Gansu, so that on arrival in Shaanbei, companies with an official strength of roughly 120 were down to 75 men.¹⁹ Once again, estimates of the army's total size vary radically. Edgar Snow, who visited the Communist base in 1936, says there were "less than 20,000 survivors," but that is an generous estimate.²⁰ Mao's rival Zhang Guotao claims he was told that "fewer than four thousand men" remained in Mao's army, and that surely errs in the opposite direction.²¹ In the absence of contemporary records, Peng Dehuai's memoir seems the most reasonable: 7,200 people, including hundreds of noncombatants.²² My own best estimate is that Mao arrived with an army of about 6,000 men, but the core was tough, disciplined, battle-tested veterans, under firm party leadership, though armed only with rifles and a few machine guns captured from the enemy. It should also be stressed that many of those who arrived in Shaanbei were recent recruits from Sichuan and elsewhere, so the casualty rate among the Jiangxi veterans was well over 90 percent. Those most likely to survive were the top leaders.

The other large external army in Shaanbei was Xu Haidong's Twenty-Fifth Army from Hubei, whose size is similarly difficult to estimate. It was certainly a powerful, experienced military force, and we have seen in the previous chapter that when Xu's army was combined with Liu Zhidan's Twenty-Sixth Army and the late Xie Zichang's Twenty-Seventh to form a new Fifteenth Army, it was Xu who was given command. While campaigning in South Shaanxi, Xu's army was reported to be only 1,500 men but "well armed with modern weapons;"²³ a contemporary Guomindang source says Xu arrived with a force of 2,000; Gao Gang in 1945 said 1,400; while Zhang Guotao's consistently low estimates report "less than 2,000" in the entire Fifteenth Army, most of whom were Shaanxi and Gansu men fighting under Hubei officers.²⁴ It seems reasonable to presume that there were at most 2,000 men in Xu Haidong's own army. As to the local forces, a contemporary report by Zhu De and Xu Haidong's later recollection put the combined armies of Xu Haidong and Liu Zhidan at 7,000 men.²⁵ This is generally consistent with a Guomindang report that estimates that Liu's army had over two thousand guns, and Xie Zichang's over three thousand.²⁶ Given that Shaanbei armies always had more soldiers than rifles, and that the Guomindang source is prior to the

costly Laoshan battle and the defections following Liu Zhidan's arrest, we may estimate that on Mao's arrival in October 1935 there were about 5,000 men in the Shaanbei armies, plus roughly 2,000 men in Xu Haidong's army. All of this suggests a total Red Army force in Shaanbei of only 13,000 men.

On arrival in Shaanbei, the party Center's first concern was the security of its new base. In September, Chiang Kai-shek established a Xi'an headquarters for his anti-Communist campaign. Under this new command, some three hundred thousand troops surrounded the last remaining Communist base, a manpower advantage of perhaps 20:1.²⁷ Chiang's forces were also better armed, with heavy machine guns, artillery, trucks for transport, and an air force of spotter planes. Chiang recognized that the split between the First and Fourth armies had critically weakened the Red Army, and he was determined to press his advantage.²⁸ Mao's first response was to order an urgent recruitment campaign to redress this military disadvantage. The campaign yielded one thousand new recruits, an unprecedented achievement in Shaanbei.²⁹ The new regime was much more aggressive in its demands on the local population, though these untrained recruits could hardly have been useful for more than porter duties.

Mao Zedong and Peng Dehuai immediately set out to stabilize the southern front. The Guomindang armies in this sector belonged to Zhang Xueliang's Northeast Army (NEA). Natives of Manchuria, they had left their homeland after the Japanese invasion in 1931 and were now used by Chiang Kai-shek to fight his domestic foes. As Japanese aggression and Chinese patriotic resistance grew in the mid-1930s, these armies were not entirely comfortable with Chiang's anti-Communist campaigns. For Mao, this provided an opportunity to strike a hard blow to dissuade them from fighting Chinese Communists rather than Japanese invaders. The battle that followed, at Zhiluozen in Fu-xian near the Gansu border, was a key example of the new level of military expertise that came with Mao's First Army. While Liu Zhidan's tactics relied on his deep local knowledge of Shaanbei topography, Mao carefully prepared with precise military maps.³⁰ With winter setting in, he supplied his troops with padded uniforms for the cold—though they were short some two thousand sets, and many still got sick and had to be sent for medical care.³¹ While Liu had fought short, quick battles, usually ambushes, that lasted a few hours, Zhiluozen was a set-piece battle that lasted several days. In the end, a great victory was claimed. The NEA's 109th Division was decimated and its commander killed. The contemporary military report counted 5,367 captives, plus 3,400 rifles, 176 machine guns, eight mortars and 220,000 rounds of ammunition. In all, about 1,300 NEA soldiers were killed or wounded. The fight was also costly on the Red Army side, with 648 casualties, which was not a sustainable ratio given the relative size of the armies.³² Still, the battle achieved its political purpose: demoralizing Zhang Xueliang's NEA and provoking a renewed interest in some accommodation with the Communists to confront their common enemy, Japan.

NEW LEADERS FOR SHAANBEI

On November 3, 1935, a new Military Committee of the Northwest Revolution was formed to command the Red Army in Shaanbei. Mao Zedong was chair, with Zhou Enlai and Peng Dehuai serving as deputies. Other members included Wang Jiaxiang, a Soviet-returned member of the Central Committee, Lin Biao from the First Army, Xu Haidong and Cheng Zihua from the Twenty-Fifth Army, and two representatives of the Shanghai Center, Nie Hongjun and Guo Hongtao.³³ None of the leaders of the Shaanbei revolution were included. The only Shaanbei native on the committee was Guo Hongtao, who had returned in 1933 to lead the criticism of Liu Zhidan's Twenty-Sixth Army. Even the local guerrillas were placed under the command of an outsider, Xiao Jinguang, another Long March veteran from Mao's native Hunan.³⁴ With these appointments, the Center took full control of the military in Shaanbei.

The Northwest Military Committee reflected the new political reality. The prominent role of Xu Haidong and his associates is particularly important. Even before Mao arrived, Xu Haidong had assumed command of the new Fifteenth Army, which included all of the Shaanbei armies. Mao was particularly anxious to ensure that his army made a good impression on Xu's troops, ordering his soldiers to bathe and wear clean uniforms for their first meeting. They were carefully instructed on what to say when they met the Fifteenth Army.³⁵ Xu Haidong was a former subordinate of Zhang Guotao, and just a month earlier, Zhang had escalated his dispute with the party Center by forming a rival Central Committee that expelled Mao, Zhou Enlai, and Zhang's rivals from Jiangxi.³⁶ Mao could not allow this split to affect Xu Haidong's loyalty, and the orders on what to say to Xu's troops certainly involved instructions on how to discuss the breach with Zhang. In the September Politburo meetings in Gansu, Zhang Guotao had been harshly criticized for "opportunism" and "warlordism," but after the Center reached Shaanbei, the line shifted to avoid discussion of past differences in the interest of party unity.³⁷ This was particularly important with Xu Haidong: avoid reopening the wounds inflicted by the split with Zhang Guotao.

One bond that linked Mao and Xu Haidong was the survival of their armies over the arduous course of their respective long marches to Shaanbei. As soon as he reached Shaanbei, Mao began promoting the lore of the Long March. On the eve of the Zhiluozen battle, he exhorted his troops with the message that the survivors of the Long March were "the elite of the Chinese Revolution," who had endured such intense hardships that "one can withstand ten, or one hundred, or even one thousand."³⁸ The elite Long March survivors were to be protected and promoted. "The [First Army] Shaanxi-Gansu Detachment and the Twenty-Fifth Army are all veterans of the Long March. In principle, they should all be made cadres, they should not be wasted as ordinary soldiers."³⁹ Presumably, the ordinary soldiers to be "wasted" in future battles would be new recruits from the Northwest. Mao was particularly upset when he learned of officers who had been demoted

for past errors and then killed in battle when their junior officer status put them in exposed frontline positions.⁴⁰ He applied the same principle to Xu Haidong's army. Learning that some army veterans were still under suspicion as a result of Hubei's *sufan* campaigns against "counter-revolutionaries," Mao argued that their persistence during the march from Hubei was sufficient to prove their loyalty and erase past suspicions.⁴¹ Of course, not all Long March survivors were immediately treated as "the elite of the Chinese Revolution." With the death and defection of so many who had set out from Jiangxi, the Communists had steadily recruited during their march. These new recruits were regarded as less reliable, and special education was ordered for those who had joined the march in Guizhou, Yunnan, and Sichuan.⁴²

In the alliance between Mao and Xu, the clear losers were the local armies from Shaanbei. As seen in the last chapter, Xu Haidong's deputies had led the *sufan* campaign against Liu Zhidan and his allies. There was tension between the local and Hubei troops before and after the October battle at Laoshan, and Xu disparaged the local troops as "very backward" and ignorant of Soviet and Red Army regulations.⁴³ Mao had to warn Xu's officers not to be arrogant, not to despise or excessively criticize the Shaanbei troops.⁴⁴ Mao was also aware of the past conflicts between Liu Zhidan's Shaan-Gan army and Xie Zichang's "Shaanbei" faction, instructing that because of their troubled historical relations the two armies should not be combined in the same units.⁴⁵ Over time, the party Center came to accept much of Xu's negative assessment of the Shaanxi soldiers. It described Shaanbei as a land of opium and bandits and was concerned about the large number of Red Army soldiers recruited from bandit gangs and local militia. The influence of the Society of Brothers was a major concern: "Among the people of Shaan-Gan-Ning there is a common phenomenon: there are many former members of the Society of Brothers, so that in the Red Army there are quite a few Brothers."⁴⁶

The Center was equally keen to control the commanding heights of the local soviet. The Central Soviet established a new Northwest office to direct the local administration, with Bo Gu (aka Qin Bangxian), one of the Twenty-Eight Bolsheviks, at its head.⁴⁷ In the party apparatus, the old Shaanxi-Gansu-Shanxi committee was replaced by a Shaan-Gan provincial committee under Zhu Lizhi and a Shaanbei committee under Guo Hongtao. Thus the two leaders of the *sufan* movement against Liu Zhidan controlled the local party apparatus. Only much later was it recognized that they continued to discriminate against Liu's comrades in their appointments.⁴⁸

In the long history of conflicts within the Communist Party, the most persistent and difficult to resolve were those between central authorities and local cadres. Local Communists typically joined the movement to advance their material or political interests, seeking access to land, local power, protection from state exactions, or some advantage in the unending competition for scarce resources. Higher party authorities had larger revolutionary goals and often called on local

activists to sacrifice on behalf of the revolution. Any resistance from the local party could be interpreted as a counter-revolutionary conspiracy, and some of the bloodiest conflicts in party history—from the Futian incident in Jiangxi, to the *sufan* campaigns in Hubei or Shaanbei—pitted outside party authorities against the local party.⁴⁹ With outsiders now firmly in control of the revolutionary movement in Shaanbei, the potential for conflict was real. The Nationalist enemy sought to encourage this conflict, painting (not implausibly) the Red Army as an external occupying force.⁵⁰ The new southern leadership was well aware of this danger and sent clear orders for the Red Army to form close relations with local Red Guards, rely on local cadres in their work, and assist in the establishment of revolutionary committees.⁵¹

Conflict, however, was inevitable, and sometimes it could be sharp. Mao's admonition against cursing or issuing commands to local cadres is a sure sign that such conduct was a problem.⁵² Even while warning against commandism, the Center was determined to transform the Shaanbei party. A directive on the local guerrillas warned against "conservatism and localism,"⁵³ while another on peasant associations stressed the danger of localism and familism.⁵⁴ Meanwhile, Zhou Enlai stipulated that Mao's First Army was to receive priority in supply efforts,⁵⁵ and there were local conflicts when the Red Army violated regulations in confiscating rich peasants' property to meet their land reform quotas.⁵⁶ Sometimes these conflicts could build into outright opposition to the new revolutionary regime. We have seen this with the Chi'an incident in Liu Zhidan's home county after his arrest. This resistance continued well into 1936, and at least one Long March veteran was killed in the effort to quell the unrest.⁵⁷ A *Dagongbao* journalist touring Shaanbei in 1936 reported that two thousand followers of Liu Zhidan were actively opposing Mao and Xu Haidong on the Shaanxi-Gansu border.⁵⁸

Liu Zhidan's still undetermined fate exacerbated these problems in late 1935. The party Center had halted arrests and executions, but Liu and his comrades remained imprisoned in Wayaobu until Zhou Enlai released them in early December.⁵⁹ Even after his release, Liu's "historical problems" remained unresolved, as is clear from the leadership positions given to his two chief accusers. Liu was initially restored to command of the Twenty-Sixth Army, where Mao appears to have tested him, sending him north from Wayaobu with orders to eliminate the local warlord Jing Yuexiu in Yulin.⁶⁰ Yulin was the well-defended political and military center of northeastern Shaanxi, the sort of town that the local Communists had never dared to attack. Liu's ill-armed force was clearly not up to the task, which failed, and on December 30 he was transferred to command a newly formed Twenty-Eighth Army.⁶¹ By the end of 1935, not only was Liu in political limbo, he had lost the army he had spent so many years building. With the Center now based in Shaanbei, it had taken charge. The Shaanbei revolution was no longer a local affair. It had new leaders with a much grander mission than Liu's, a mission that involved broader contacts and negotiations than Liu Zhidan would have been capable of. Ironically,

though, new instructions from Moscow soon led the Center to flexible policies toward potential allies, united front policies that would be very close to those that Liu had long practiced—and long been criticized for.

In mid-December, the Politburo began a critical week-long meeting in Wayaobu, the leading town in the soviet base surrounding Anding County, northeast of Yan'an. Late in November, Lin Yuying, Lin Biao's cousin, returned from Moscow. For security reasons, he carried no documents, delivering only an oral report on the Seventh Comintern Congress.⁶² The party Center had been cut off from the International since September 1934, when arrests in Shanghai severed radio communication with Moscow. Through the entire Long March and the early weeks in Shaanbei, the CCP Center had acted without external advice.⁶³ At Wayaobu, the party Center received first-hand news of the Comintern's new united front policy, designed to confront the Nazi threat in Germany and the global menace of fascism. The CCP adjusted its line to support "the broadest possible national anti-Japanese united front" of "all classes, all political factions, all social organizations, and all armed forces." To this end, the worker-peasant soviets were renamed "soviet people's republics," and land reform policies were adjusted to protect "bourgeois" exploitation by rich peasants but not "feudal" exploitation by landlords.⁶⁴

The Wayaobu meeting took a significant step toward the united front policy that would become increasingly important in 1936 and beyond. Just as the party was gathering in the small Shaanbei town, students in Beiping were engaged in fervent demonstrations, soon famous as the December Ninth Movement, against Japan's promotion of an "autonomous" North China and Chiang Kai-shek's conciliatory response.⁶⁵ Immediately after the Wayaobu meeting, Liu Shaoqi was sent to Tianjin to organize leftist students there and in Beijing.⁶⁶ Given the embattled status of the Shaanbei soviet, however, the immediate concern at Wayaobu was military. Here the conclusion was clear: it was time to resume the march toward the Soviet border.

INTO SHANXI: THE LONG MARCH RESUMES

When Mao Zedong rejected Zhang Guotao's decision to lead the Long March south and west in Sichuan, his reason was clear: in the proposed base "the population is only eight thousand and there is very little grain. In [the west Sichuan towns of] Maogong and Fubian the grain is already exhausted [from the Red Army's previous occupation]. A large army based there faces the threat of starvation."⁶⁷ When Mao arrived in southern Gansu, the exaggerated newspaper reports of a large soviet in Shaanbei provided a better alternative, but on arrival the party Center was gravely disappointed by the poverty and sparse population of the region. As one report noted, the population density was less than 5 percent of the Lower Yangzi province of Jiangsu.⁶⁸ A 1936 report to the Comintern described the new base in stark terms: "The topography is mountainous with deep gullies. There are

few trees and little water. Residents are few and communication extremely difficult. . . . Population density is very low, no more than four hundred thousand total. Except along the west bank of the Yellow River, few villages have more than forty or fifty families. Even along the main roads, you can go fifteen or twenty kilometers without seeing a single home. . . . Agriculture produces mostly millet, little wheat or other grains. There is not enough to support long occupation by a large army.”⁶⁹ Precisely the conditions that had precluded a west Sichuan base were now applied to Shaanbei.

Mao had consistently displayed a preference for aggressive mobile warfare, moving to the enemy’s rear when his base was threatened and “fighting on external lines.” He had advocated this strategy in Jiangxi and returned to it in Shaanbei.⁷⁰ His first impulse was to expand the soviet to the south, toward the richer counties on the northern rim of the Wei River valley. There he hoped to find fresh recruits for the Red Army and reach the students who were increasingly committed to patriotic resistance to Japan.⁷¹ At the same time, as we have seen, he dispatched Liu Zhidan to take the more densely populated area around Yulin. All of these efforts failed, which was hardly surprising. Expansion toward Guanzhong was a strategy that Bolsheviks in the provincial committee had long urged on Liu Zhidan, with disastrous results. Within the central military leadership, Lin Biao seems to have abandoned all hope for Shaanbei: he proposed moving the Red Army to southern Shaanxi, along the border of his home province, Hubei. Mao rejected this option for the time being and summoned Lin to Wayaobu.⁷²

As we have seen, the Wayaobu Politburo meeting followed Lin Yuying’s return from Moscow. Politically, Lin’s main message involved moderating the party line to accommodate the Comintern’s new united front policy. Militarily, Lin reported that before leaving Moscow, “He obtained Stalin’s agreement that the main force of the Red Army could advance to the north and northwest, and he [Stalin] was not opposed to it approaching the Soviet Union.” In Lin’s view the best policy was “to establish a broad base in the north, combine the domestic and national war, transform the Red Army into the true anti-Japanese vanguard, unite with the Red Army of the Soviet Union to oppose their common enemy, Japan, thus improving the technological capacity of the Red Army.”⁷³ There was considerable debate about the best route to the Soviet or Soviet-controlled Mongolian border. Zhang Wentian evidently preferred a route to the northwest through Ningxia, but Mao insisted on attacking east through Shanxi before turning north. This route had the distinct advantage that it could be portrayed as a campaign toward the front with Japan.⁷⁴ Peng Dehuai, supported by Zhou Enlai, warned against abandoning the Shaanbei base, and Mao assured them that the campaigning army would retain a link to Shaanbei. Peng and Zhou seemed to doubt that the Red Army could push through Yan Xishan’s armies in Shanxi before turning north through Suiyuan (now Inner Mongolia) to reach Mongolia and receive aid from the Soviet Union.⁷⁵ In the end, Mao prevailed, and with the decision

to attack through Shanxi, the next stage of the Long March to a Soviet rendezvous began.⁷⁶

Mao seemed supremely confident. His famous poem “Snow,” with its reference to the Yellow River, soon to be crossed, and the Great Wall, not far to the north, was written at this time. It refers to the great emperors of past dynasties, from the first emperor of the Qin to Genghis Khan, and concludes, “All are gone. / For heroes, now is the time.”⁷⁷ With its evocation of China’s landscape and ancient leaders, it was a testament to Mao and the party’s national ambitions, and millions of Chinese can recite it today. It suited the fact that despite the secret plan to fight through to the Mongolian border, the public aim of the Eastern Expedition was to confront Japanese aggression. The army was called the “Anti-Japanese Vanguard” (Kang-Ri xianfengjun 抗日先锋队), and Yan Xishan, who bore the immediate brunt of the attack, was termed, along with Chiang Kai-shek, a “traitorous sellout” (*maiguozei* 卖国贼) acting under Japanese direction.⁷⁸ With the December 9, 1935, student demonstration in Beijing spreading its influence over much of China, the tide of anti-Japanese sentiment was rising, and the Red Army did everything it could to harness this patriotic fervor for its purposes.

The most important fruit of the new united front policy was a truce with Zhang Xueliang’s NEA to protect the southern flank of the Shaanbei base. As we will examine in more detail presently, the Communists used captives from Zhiluozen and other battles to spread their message of anti-Japanese patriotism in the NEA. With preparations for the Shanxi campaign under way, a CCP security agent met with Zhang Xueliang to begin negotiations toward a united front. A *de facto* truce was arranged, Zhang promised not to assist Yan Xishan, and he apparently provided military maps of Shanxi, Hebei, and Suiyuan.⁷⁹

With the southern flank secure, the party renewed its focus on recruitment. In November 1935, Mao termed the vigorous expansion of the Red Army “the most important, most important, most important task” of the party.⁸⁰ An order went out to recruit 7,000 new soldiers by early 1936, and 2,600 more by March.⁸¹ An additional 3,000 stretcher bearers were summoned from the Suide area.⁸² In all likelihood, both of these groups were mobilized from local Young Pioneers and Red Guards. An October 1935 order of the Shaanxi-Gansu-Shanxi soviet stipulated that “all young men and women aged fourteen to twenty-three *sui* are to enroll in the Young Pioneers. Those between twenty-three and thirty-five *sui*, females excepted, are to join the Red Guards.”⁸³ This mobilization would have almost doubled the size of the Red Army in Shaanbei, and Li Wei-han admitted that it was exceedingly difficult to meet these goals.⁸⁴ Shaanbei peasants were willing to fight to protect their families, but a distant expedition to fight Japan was not a cause they readily embraced.⁸⁵ Some recruiting involved deception: summoning local cadres for “training” and then enrolling them in the Red Army.⁸⁶ In the south, recruitment drives had been carried out with intensive political pressure that easily became coercive as local cadres sought to meet their quotas.⁸⁷ Now those practices were brought to Shaanbei.

On February 20, 1936, the main force of the Red Army crossed the Yellow River and quickly established a headquarters in the Lüliang mountains of western Shanxi. Mao had calculated that the long-standing conflict between Yan Xishan and Chiang Kai-shek (the two had fought a bitter and costly war in 1930) would prevent Yan from calling on Chiang for support.⁸⁸ He was wrong. Chiang's forces established an effective line of blockhouses along the railway through the Fen River valley that the Red Army was unable to cross. Their assault stymied, Red Army commanders were soon reporting heavy losses.⁸⁹ Mao pressed Lin Biao for one final victory, which was not achieved before an April retreat back to Shaanbei.⁹⁰

Just before the withdrawal, the Shaanbei revolution endured one final blow: the loss of its hero, Liu Zhidan. To assist the Shanxi expedition, Liu Zhidan's newly formed Twenty-Eighth Army in northeast Shaanxi was ordered to cross the Yellow River into Shanxi and then move south to protect the fords for the coming retreat. It was an unimpressive force, a small group of five to six hundred former guerrillas, a "rotten army" in the opinion of Liu's former comrades.⁹¹ On April 13, Mao and Peng Dehuai ordered Liu to attack the well-defended fort protecting the ford at Sanjiaozhen. When the assault stalled, Liu moved to the front to direct the attack and was shot and killed. Several of his key lieutenants also died in the battle.⁹² The circumstances of Liu's death remain controversial. To this day, many in Shaanbei believe that Mao was responsible.⁹³ If Mao and the party Center did not directly order Liu's elimination, one plausible theory is that after Liu and his lieutenants were criticized in 1935 and given an inferior army to lead, they sought to prove themselves and regain favor by "risking their lives on the battlefield" and paid the ultimate price.⁹⁴ Unless and until the Chinese Central Archives are open to independent researchers, we will never know the answer to this puzzle. Nonetheless, the fact that so many Shaanbei people believe that the party was responsible for Liu's demise is a significant indication of enduring suspicion toward the party Center.

As the Red Army withdrew from Shanxi, it made energetic efforts to turn military defeat into political victory. Chiang Kai-shek and Yan Xishan were blamed for blocking the Red Army's attempt to fight the Japanese invaders.⁹⁵ The party stressed its success in recruiting eight thousand new soldiers to the Red Army and confiscating \$300,000 from local coffers and the wealthy.⁹⁶ In his speech to military officers, Mao was more critical. Complaining of "liberalism" and commanders' concern for their own units rather than larger revolutionary objectives, he blamed some for not pressing the attack for fear of losses.⁹⁷ For the peasants of Shaanbei, the loss of their longtime leader and an untold number of young recruits caused many to wonder if this brief and dramatically unsuccessful foray into Shanxi was really worth the cost. There is no evidence that Mao felt similar remorse.

HARD TIMES

Liu Zhidan's military victories of 1935 had brought much of the countryside and several towns in eastern Shaanbei under Communist control. When the Red Army attacked Shanxi, it forced Yan Xishan to withdraw his troops from Wupu and Jia-xian on the west bank of the Yellow River, and the Communists soon occupied these counties.⁹⁸ For a time, there was relatively secure Communist control of much of Shaanbei. After the failure of the Shanxi expedition, with the Red Army in retreat, all of this was threatened as Chiang Kai-shek's armies continued their pursuit into Shaanxi. The party secretary in Shaanbei reported the loss of Red districts in northeast Shaanbei, difficulties in recruitment, and "rumors" that "the Red Army has come back in defeat. Now it's going to be awful."⁹⁹ In June, the Communist headquarters in Wayaobu was abandoned as the town was running out of grain to feed the army, and the party leadership fled to Bao'an in the far northwest. The Center had hoped to surrender Wayaobu to the NEA, with which it had established a cooperative relationship, but Chiang Kai-shek sent his reliable general Tang Enbo to take the town.¹⁰⁰

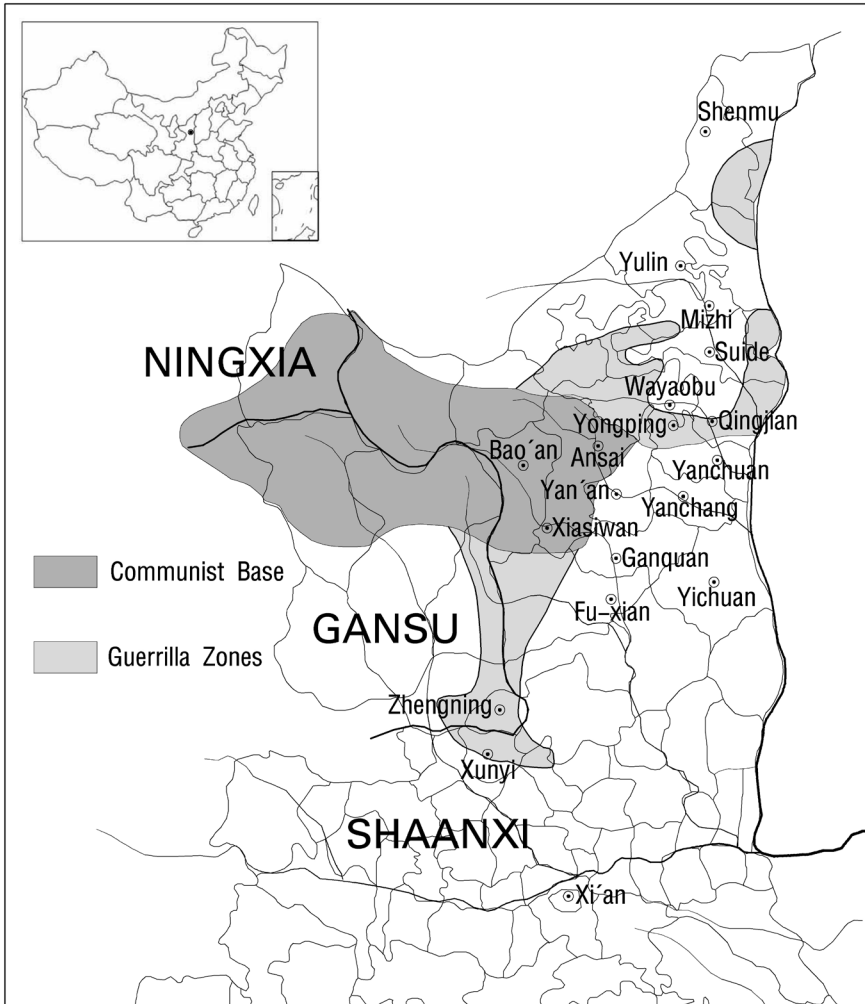
A *Dagongbao* journalist visited the former Communist areas of eastern Shaanbei in the fall of 1936. He found Tang Enbo engaged in an aggressive program of road building to connect the Nationalist stronghold in Yulin to the counties further south and the fords linking Shaanbei to Shanxi. A lazy magistrate was fired and arrested, and a corrupt opium-dealing military officer was shot. Soon all of the major towns and communication routes were in Nationalist hands. The Communists, however, controlled much of the countryside, and the same journalist reported that most of the adult males in the former Communist strongholds were now in the Red Army.¹⁰¹ Even in occupied towns like Wayaobu, the Communists had left their mark. The reporter reluctantly admitted that as a result of the brief Communist occupation, the town residents displayed an unusual degree of political engagement.¹⁰² On the whole, however, the revolution was in retreat, and the eastern portion of the Shaanbei soviet was reduced to a guerrilla zone.¹⁰³

From early 1936, the Communists had strengthened their rural organization. Participation in the Young Pioneers and Red Guards was made a "sacred responsibility of every soviet citizen." Women, rich peasants, and intellectuals were all included—though the party was also enjoined to guard against alien class elements. All these young people were to have weapons, though few would be firearms, and their military duties went beyond marching and parades to include sentry duty, intelligence, and the inspection of travel passes. With the Nationalists now occupying the towns, these young people formed the key network of activists to warn against enemy forays into the countryside.¹⁰⁴ When government forces ventured into the rural areas, the Communists emptied the villages, leading the peasants with their meagre belongings to hide in the hills. The Communists also prepared for intense class struggle, giving local soviet cadres and guerrillas the authority

to execute suspected spies and traitors.¹⁰⁵ To coordinate these efforts, the party organization was gradually professionalized: members of the district (*qu* 区) party committee and rural headmen (*xiangzhang*) were “divorced from production”—that is, they became paid employees of the nascent Communist state.¹⁰⁶

The return of the Nationalist Party and its enhanced military presence in eastern Shaanbei exacerbated the class struggle in the countryside. Some wealthier peasants demanded the return of land confiscated during the previous year’s land reform, a move that the Communists vigorously contested. These conflicts often became violent, to the extent that, as noted in the previous chapter, in some Communist strongholds “all local strongmen and evil gentry were killed.”¹⁰⁷ However, class conflict was not the only form of social change. As in many social revolutions, gender relations became a key flash point. The *Dagongbao* reporter visiting Shaanbei noted the spread of “disorderly” gender relations, with young couples marrying within their own village.¹⁰⁸ Presumably the young people were making their own marital choices and choosing partners whom they knew. The speed with which these changes occurred is notable. Since the Young Pioneers and Red Guards included both men and women, these new organizations provided opportunities for couples of marrying age to get to know each other. In addition, with so many men in the army, young women were performing more farm work, with chances to socialize away from the supervision of parents.¹⁰⁹

Despite continuing strength in the countryside, by the late summer of 1936 the secure Communist base had been reduced to a small pocket in northwest Shaanxi and neighboring Gansu and Ningxia. An August report to the Comintern gives the clearest picture of the Shaan-Gan-Ning base at this juncture. Some soviet bases survived in eastern Shaanbei, but they were broken up into small pieces by Nationalist blockade lines and Communist-suppression units. In the counties just south of Yan’an, the Nationalists controlled the towns and the main roads, and the Communists the countryside. Similarly, the villages of northeastern Gansu were Communist controlled. The report claimed only four counties under complete Communist control: Huan-xian in Gansu; and Bao’an, Ansai, and Anding in Shaanxi. The Anding claim was certainly false, as its main town, Wayaobu, had been abandoned in June. Four small county seats were credibly claimed: Yan-chi and Yuwang in Ningxia, and Dingbian and Jingbian in Shaanxi. “Except for Dingbian, all are minor towns of less than two hundred families.”¹¹⁰ The main towns in Shaanbei—Yan’an, Yulin, Suide, Wayaobu—were all in Nationalist hands.¹¹¹ The Communist capital in Bao’an certainly did not look like the center of a national movement. Recall that in the 1920s, the local government had abandoned the town for the Yongningshan fortress because Bao’an itself was vulnerable to local bandits. In 1936, it was still smaller than the average town in the Lower Yangzi, with “most of the houses . . . in ruins.”¹¹² Edgar Snow visited Bao’an in the fall to conduct his famous interviews of Mao. His wife described Bao’an as “a place where life



MAP 8. Northern Shaanxi Red bases and guerrilla zones in the fall of 1936, on the eve of the Xi'an Incident. Compared to map 7, the Communist base had been driven to the poorer west of the region. (Based on military staff to Comintern, August 28, 1936, CZWJ, 1102; and Guomindang BOI report, March 1937, BOI 270/815.)

was barely sustainable.”¹¹³ Map 8 reconstructs the Communist-controlled areas and guerrilla zones of August 1936.

The Communists claimed a total population under their control of four hundred thousand. Assuming half of these were males, and half of those were able-bodied adults, that gives an adult male population of only one hundred thousand. There were allegedly thirty thousand in the Red Army, though this probably includes

local guerrillas, a higher rate of participation than in Jiangxi, and certainly unsustainable over the long haul.¹¹⁴ Another report said that in the Communists' Shaan-Gan province, the poorer area along the provincial border, the total population was sixty thousand, with fifteen thousand adult males, of whom five thousand were already engaged in local administration or guerrilla action. The authorities saw little hope for additional army recruitment.¹¹⁵ Indeed, the party admitted that the heavy conscription of adult males into the Red Army had weakened the local self-defense forces.¹¹⁶ Perhaps the clearest indication of the dire straits of the Shaanbei revolution is a long gap, lasting from August 1936 until the spring of 1937, in the leading documentary collection on the revolution in the Northwest.¹¹⁷ It is unlikely that no reports survive from this period; more likely, there was no good news for historians of the revolution to report.

A MULTI-SIDED UNITED FRONT

As the local situation in Shaanbei became perilous for the CCP, national and global events were moving in directions more favorable to the revolution. Here the new central leadership was critical in rescuing the imperiled Shaanbei base. Mao Zedong had greater strategic vision and much broader contacts than Liu Zhidan, and he proved remarkably adept in adapting to the new situation. His rival Zhang Guotao, after his return in defeat from Gansu, described a telling interaction with Mao:

With a smile on his face, Mao once said to me that he was playing the market, implying that he was doing big business with little capital, namely, the small Red Army. According to his speculations, the Japanese aggressions against Northeast China and North China had upset the balance of power in the Far East and had very much displeased the Soviet Union, the United States, and Great Britain; while at home the anti-Japanese passion had spread deep into the Nationalist armed forces, and therefore it would be very hard for Chiang Kai-shek to persist in his nonresistance policy toward Japan.¹¹⁸

Mao was right, but the party's response to these new opportunities was necessarily multifaceted and involved a fair degree of duplicity as he dealt separately with the diverse parties involved. For much of this, he relied on Zhou Enlai, whose capacity for diplomatic sleight of hand was well developed.

Japanese aggression was the paramount threat that eclipsed all else. After occupying Manchuria in 1931, the Japanese army steadily encroached on the neighboring areas of Inner Mongolia and then North China itself. The Nationalist government in Nanjing appealed to the League of Nations and tried every diplomatic means to slow the aggression while Chiang Kai-shek prepared his military for a larger war that even he saw as inevitable. But concessions only led to further Japanese demands, which by 1935 included the "autonomy" of North China—in essence severing the area around the old capital of Beijing from Nanjing's

control and installing a puppet government favorable to Japan. When Nanjing again temporized in an agreement signed by the minister of war, withdrawing its forces and prohibiting “anti-Japanese” activities in the Beiping area, students in the former capital led massive demonstrations, which in turn sparked patriotic protests throughout the country. By June 1936, rival militarists in southern China had formed an Anti-Japanese National Salvation Army (Kang-Ri jiuguojun 抗日救国军) and began marching north to challenge Chiang and press for armed resistance to Japan.¹¹⁹

Japanese aggression had provided a rationale for the Red Army’s Shanxi expedition as a self-proclaimed “Anti-Japanese Vanguard,” while the student activism brought the dispatch of Liu Shaoqi to the Beijing-Tianjin area, where he sought to bring the fractious student movement under Communist Party guidance.¹²⁰ Attracting broader support for an anti-Japanese united front necessarily involved moderating the class struggle. Land reform policies had been changed to protect rich peasant rights after the Wayaobu meeting; now there were further orders to guarantee land rights, encourage production, and import plows. Trade was promoted and commercial activities were protected.¹²¹ By September 1936, while the party insisted on maintaining clear class standards for party membership, it further revised the immediate goals of the revolution to be a democratic republic (*minzhu gongheguo*).¹²²

There were two large government armies in Shaanxi at this time. Yang Hucheng’s Northwest Army had dominated the province since 1931, had cooperated with the Communists in the National Revolution of the 1920s, and had several underground Communists in its officer corps. Party cells in the military were independent of the provincial committee, so these key leftist officers survived the repeated arrests of the provincial apparatus. By the fall of 1934, they were able to smuggle guns, ammunition, medicine, electronics, books, and military maps to both the Twenty-Sixth Army and the Fourth Army as it passed through southern Shaanxi. Yang’s young, educated wife was apparently a Communist, and in early 1936, party operatives in Beiping sent agents with a powerful radio receiver to work in Yang’s army.¹²³ By 1936, however, Yang’s army was dwarfed in size, influence, and armaments by Zhang Xueliang’s NEA from Manchuria. Zhang Xueliang was the most immediate and important target of the Communists’ united front policy. The process began in late 1935, directly after the battle at Zhiluozen. Mao Zedong wrote to the commanding general, berating him for fighting Chinese rather than the enemy occupying his homeland, and promising to avoid hostilities if the NEA ceased further attacks.¹²⁴ Soon it was discovered that an officer captured in an earlier battle was open to persuasion. Peng Dehuai went to talk to him: Gao Fuyuan, a former student of Beiping’s Furen University, regiment commander in the NEA and a progressive patriot. Peng found Gao open to united front appeals, and he was returned to his old unit to spread the word of his kindly treatment in captivity. Peng arranged to have the besieged NEA garrison at Ganquan supplied with grain

in exchange for cash. By January, Gao had conveyed word of the local arrangement to his commander, who in turn passed the news to Zhang Xueliang.¹²⁵

The Communist Party had long engaged in underground work in Nationalist and warlord armies, but the purpose had been to encourage mutinies or defections. Now subversion was explicitly prohibited: "The aim of our work in the Northeast Army first is not to undermine or divide the Northeast Army . . . and second, is not to turn the Northeast Army into a Red Army, supporting the program of the Red Army, but to turn the Northeast Army into an ally of the Red Army, sharing our principles of national salvation and resistance to Japan."¹²⁶ An open letter to NEA officers appealed for united resistance to Japan and the "traitor Chiang Kai-shek."¹²⁷ At the same time, local efforts sought to eliminate conflict with NEA units. Markets were opened, and there was fraternization across enemy lines. Attentive party operatives found that older women were often best at carrying the party's message to young soldiers at the markets. Younger people performed patriotic dramas to promote their anti-Japanese message to NEA soldiers.¹²⁸ At night, local activists near the front line organized young men and women to sing songs and invite the "White" soldiers to join them.¹²⁹ Soldiers in enemy units were encouraged to form Anti-Japanese National Salvation Societies, but it was admitted that such open political activity was difficult, so sympathizers used old-style classmate, sworn brotherhood, secret society or local ties to spread their patriotic message: "Use an old-style exterior with an Anti-Japanese, Dump Chiang content."¹³⁰ Captives were well treated, beating and cursing was prohibited, and the wounded received medical attention. Captured soldiers were lectured on the party's new patriotic program, invited to witness public celebrations, then released to their old units, where many conveyed positive messages of life in the Communist areas.¹³¹ Some, like Gao Fuyuan, who was instrumental in starting this process, secretly joined the Communist Party.¹³²

All of these efforts were carried out with great care and appropriate secrecy. In early 1936, the Red Army was preparing its campaign into Shanxi, and a truce with the NEA was critical to protect its rear areas and southern flank. On January 20, Zhang Xueliang met with a Communist security agent to arrange a cease-fire in place and a restoration of trade.¹³³ The Communists issued strict orders that commerce should be carried out by people in civilian clothes, all agreements were to be oral, and there should be no public announcement of the arrangements.¹³⁴ Sometimes it was necessary to fake battles, with NEA soldiers firing in the air to satisfy or mislead anti-Communist officers or agents of the Nanjing regime.¹³⁵ Still, the early meetings with Zhang Xueliang gave impetus to a complex process of negotiation that would develop in the following months.

Zhang Xueliang was unquestionably the pivotal actor in the convoluted web of conflict and cooperation that bound the actors in Northwest China. His father had begun his career as a bandit and had risen to become the warlord of Northeast China (Manchuria) before the Japanese blew up his train and killed him in 1928.

Zhang Xueliang succeeded his father as head of the NEA and played a key role in Chiang Kai-shek's effort to bring North China under his control. Zhang was hampered, however, by a playboy reputation and a substantial addiction to opium, and in 1931 many blamed him for the loss of Manchuria to the Japanese. In 1933, cured of his addiction, he traveled to Europe, where he was much impressed by Mussolini's reforms in Italy and returned convinced that only fascism or communism could save China.¹³⁶ Chiang Kai-shek appointed him to lead the Communist-suppression headquarters in Xi'an, where he quickly found himself torn between loyalty to Chiang and a passionate desire to recover his homeland from Japan. When his army suffered successive defeats at the hands of the Red Army in the fall of 1935, Zhang found himself shunned by Chiang Kai-shek and courted by leftist patriots supporting a united front against Japan. When he received the cease-fire overtures from Shaanbei, he met with the CCP representative, then arranged a secret meeting with Zhou Enlai in a Yan'an church on April 11, 1936.¹³⁷

In his late-night talk with Zhou Enlai, Zhang made clear that he could not oppose Chiang Kai-shek, only urge the Generalissimo to resist Japan. The problem was Chiang's commitment to first eliminating the Communist opposition. Chiang's consistent position was "first internal pacification, then external resistance" (*rangwai bixian annei* 攘外必先安内).¹³⁸ Zhang Xueliang recognized that the literal meaning of the slogan was "[Before] resisting the external [foe], we must first pacify domestic [enemies]." In his diary, Chiang confirmed this interpretation, complaining that Zhang Xueliang did not realize "there are stages to any enterprise. You must complete one stage before moving on to the next."¹³⁹ Having fought the Red Army in Shaanbei, Zhang was convinced that even if the Communists' main forces were defeated, the guerrilla struggle would continue indefinitely. With full domestic pacification unattainable, resistance to Japan could be postponed forever.¹⁴⁰ To Zhang, this was unacceptable. On the other hand, he was unwilling to oppose Chiang openly unless the Generalissimo fully acceded to Japan's ambitions. He informed Zhou Enlai that despite his approval of the local cease-fire, if Chiang ordered him to attack the Communists, he would have to comply.¹⁴¹ He proposed an alternative to the Communists' "Oppose Japan, dump Chiang" policy, a change that the Communists would soon adopt: "Force Chiang to resist Japan" (*bi-jiang kang-Ri* 逼蒋抗日).¹⁴²

As Zhang Xueliang maneuvered between loyalty to Chiang and his patriotic sympathies for the Communist cause, he had several concrete problems to consider. For one thing, at age thirty-six, he was a relatively young commander, and many of his generals were older, more conservative, and more committed to the government's anti-Communist agenda than the officers who had negotiated the cease-fire in Shaanbei.¹⁴³ In addition, when the NEA was forced out of Manchuria, it lost one of the largest arsenals in China and was now entirely dependent on Chiang Kai-shek's Nanjing government for arms and financial support. If Zhang Xueliang was to break with Chiang Kai-shek, he needed an alternative source of

support, and the only viable provider was the Soviet Union. As perilous as this might seem, Zhang knew that Chiang Kai-shek was himself negotiating with the Russians (as we shall see presently), so he felt emboldened to pursue his own initiative.¹⁴⁴ After the Yan'an meetings with Zhou Enlai, Zhang agreed to assist in sending a CCP representative to Moscow via Xinjiang, to dispatch his own representative via Europe, and to harbor party agents in his Xi'an headquarters.¹⁴⁵ By June, cooperation between Zhang and the Communists was so close that he requested to join the Communist Party. This request was referred to Moscow, which was appalled at the idea of admitting a warlord with a questionable background into the vanguard of the proletariat and rejected it outright.¹⁴⁶ As remarkable as it may seem for a warlord to join the Communist Party, these were extraordinary times. The Russian archives include a rambling letter from the Xinjiang warlord Sheng Shicai, received in mid-March, which chastised Chiang Kai-shek for his weak resistance to Japan; boasted of reading Marx, Lenin, and Stalin; requested introduction to the party; and promised, if Stalin agreed, to facilitate the secret transport of military assistance to the Red Army in Gansu.¹⁴⁷ Zhang Xueliang was not the only warlord anxious to join the socialist camp.

The vehicle for the proposed Communist alliance with the NEA was a secret plan for a Northwest National Defense Government. This new Northwest government would "open a link to the Soviet Union and sign mutual assistance treaties with the Soviet Union and Mongolia."¹⁴⁸ The aim was "to establish a great revolutionary base in China's Northwest, linked together as one [*dacheng yipian* 打成一片] with the Soviet Union and Outer Mongolia."¹⁴⁹ In June 1936, radio contact with Moscow was restored, and the party Center was able to transmit its plans to the Communist International. In a long radiogram of June 26, the CCP Center reviewed the past differences with Zhang Guotao and presented the Northwest National Defense Government as a means to reunify the party as Zhang Guotao, allegedly at Zhu De's urging, resumed his march north toward Shaanbei. Lanzhou, capital of Gansu, was designated the seat of this new government, to be headed by Zhang Xueliang. After a summary of the united front negotiations with Zhang's NEA and the Northwest Army of Yang Hucheng, the letter noted that "the monthly payroll to the soldiers of the NEA, which amounts to \$2,000,000, completely depends on receipts from Nanjing and would completely cease if the army moved." For these soldiers, those of Yang Hucheng, and the Red Army, the party requested monthly Soviet aid in the amount of \$3 million. The letter then continued, "In addition to the financial question, there is a very important military question. We hope to get planes, heavy artillery, shells, infantry rifles, anti-aircraft machine guns, pontoons . . . , etc. Please inquire whether the political situation makes it possible to give assistance, and to what extent."¹⁵⁰ Such an enormous request for assistance naturally required approval at the highest levels, and the head of the Comintern, Georgi Dimitrov, forwarded the letter to Stalin in early July.

Dimitrov was a Bulgarian who had headed the West European bureau of the Comintern from 1929. Arrested in Berlin, he was released from jail after a dramatic trial and returned to Moscow to assume leadership of the Comintern. Hitler's rise had convinced him that the party's leftist policies targeting social democrats as much as Nazis were an error, and under Dimitrov's leadership the Comintern began a fundamental revision of the international line. Its Seventh Congress, in July 1935, recognized that Hitler's Germany and Japanese militarism posed an existential threat to the socialist motherland and accepted the need for all Communists to enter united or popular front alliances with bourgeois parties to combat the global fascist menace. Wang Ming, the CCP representative to the Comintern, drafted an "August 1 Declaration" in the name of Mao and Zhu De, which was published in France in October. This was the first CCP call for a united front, whose message was communicated to the CCP leadership when Lin Yuying arrived in late 1935.¹⁵¹

The "August 1 Declaration" has long been recognized as a critical moment in the CCP's shift to a united front policy, though Wang Ming's authorship and Mao's ignorance of the declaration in his name have only recently been established.¹⁵² The limits of the envisioned united front should be noted. The declaration still condemned the "step-by-step surrender of the sellout Nanjing government" and urged opposition to "Japanese brigands and the bandit Chiang."¹⁵³ Though the Chinese united front has often been compared to the Popular Front uniting French progressives against Hitler, Wang Ming was thinking more of Germany and the need to unite all forces against Chiang Kai-shek just as progressive Germans should unite against Hitler.¹⁵⁴ It is not surprising, therefore, that when the party Center received Lin Yuying's report at the Wayaobu Politburo meeting, it enlarged the united front to include, as we have seen, "all classes, all political factions, all social organizations, and all armed forces" but still directed the front against both Chiang Kai-shek and Japan. The Soviet Union was explicitly identified as "the strongest accomplice [*bangshou* 帮手] of the Chinese Revolution."¹⁵⁵

The Communist leadership was not alone in noting the 1935 shift in Comintern policy. With Hitler's rise imperiling German support for Nanjing's armies, Chiang Kai-shek also looked to the Soviet Union as a possible ally against Japan. Despite years of warfare against the Communists, there was an important precedent for Soviet support of the Chinese Revolution. The Russians had provided critical aid to the Nationalist Party in the 1920s, including arming Chiang's military. Chiang had visited Russia to learn about the Red Army, and his son had gone to study there and was still in the Soviet Union with a Russian wife. In 1932, the Chinese government restored diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, and the Russian ambassador in Nanjing actively encouraged anti-Japanese sentiment.¹⁵⁶ Following the Comintern's Seventh Congress, Chiang began exploring a restoration of the Soviet alliance. There were conversations with the Soviet ambassador in the fall of 1935; then in January of the new year the military attaché in Moscow held two

long conversations with Wang Ming, the CCP representative to the Comintern, to discuss ways to resolve the civil war. According to Wang Ming's detailed transcript of the first exchange, the attaché was remarkably frank in discussing Nanjing's motives for the demarche. War with Japan was expected in September, but "Chiang Kai-shek said we have few bullets and artillery shells; our entire supplies are only sufficient for three months of warfare. We need to find a source for military supplies." The United States and Britain were willing to help, but they were far away. "If war breaks out, will the Soviet Union be willing to help?"¹⁵⁷ When the second conversation got around to the terms of a potential united front, the exchange became more acrimonious. Wang Ming saw Chiang insisting on an end to the Soviets and dispatch of the weak Red Army to the most perilous fighting fronts against Japan. When the talks adjourned so the attaché could consult with his superiors, Wang Ming concluded that the meetings were designed to gain information about the Red Army and that Chiang Kai-shek was acting in bad faith.¹⁵⁸

In fact, the talks continued at an even higher level. Now, however, divisions within the Nationalist Party were evident for all to see—providing opportunities for Mao and the CCP to exploit, but also challenges in determining who could make a decision that would hold. Sun Yat-sen's widow, Song Qingling, had long been sympathetic to the Communists and represented a lonely left wing of the Guomindang, protected by her late husband's status and the fact that she was the sister of Mme. Chiang, Song Meiling. In January 1936, Song Qingling sent a message to the Communists in Shaanbei, in apparent coordination with her brother, T. V. Soong (Song Ziwen), the former finance minister. At the same time, Chiang Kai-shek asked Chen Lifu, leader of the powerful conservative CC Clique and the Investigation Bureau, to negotiate with the Soviets, first on an aborted mission to Moscow, then directly with the Soviet ambassador in Nanjing. In addition, Chen contacted the underground CCP to reach the Communists in the north. Representatives of these groups reached Wayaobu in February 1936, after which Mao and the CCP Center authorized negotiations in Shanghai between Chen Lifu and Pan Hannian, who had recently returned from Moscow.¹⁵⁹

Mao recognized that such leftists as Song Qingling were powerless within the Nationalist Party. On the other hand, he knew that many patriotic Nationalists favored allying with the Soviet Union to combat Japan, and public opinion was growing to end the civil war and concentrate on resisting Japan. The sticking point was always the position of Chiang Kai-shek. The Communists had long treated Chiang as a "traitor" selling out the country to Japan. In his conversation with Zhou Enlai in Yan'an, Zhang Xueliang had indicated that he was unwilling to abandon Chiang and had urged the Communists to moderate their opposition to the Generalissimo. By April, Mao and the party leadership acknowledged that continued opposition to Chiang was inconsistent with their call to end the civil war.¹⁶⁰ After radio contact with Moscow was resumed in June, the Comintern added its authority to this position: opposition to Chiang Kai-shek was an incorrect

understanding of the Comintern's Seventh Congress intent.¹⁶¹ By August, Mao would write to Pan Hannian, his negotiator in Nanjing, to state explicitly that "the core of our policy is to unite with Chiang to resist Japan."¹⁶² A flurry of letters went to Guomindang politicians, progressive intellectuals, and regional militarists to promote the party's new united front policies and call for an end to civil war so the nation could prepare for the coming war against Japan. These communications were certainly facilitated by the dispatch of key Communist leaders to Zhang Xueliang's headquarters in Xi'an, with its ready access to national telegraph networks.¹⁶³ Across China, left-leaning Guomindang members, disaffected local militarists, and progressive opinion leaders began reaching out to Communist operatives, making contact with the Red Army in Shaanbei and the International in Moscow.¹⁶⁴

By October, Mao had drafted the Communist proposal for a united front with the Nationalist Party in terms that Zhou Enlai was to present in Nanjing. The purpose was "an anti-Japanese national salvation united front of all parties, all factions, all circles, and all armies of the whole country." To this end, the Nanjing government should cease attacks on the Communists and "demarcate the necessary and appropriate Red Army bases, provide the necessary military equipment, military uniforms, military expenses, food supplies, and all other military supplies" for the army to fight Japan. On the condition that Red Army leadership not be changed, the Communists promised to accept a specified field of battle under a unified military command. Politically, the Nanjing government should permit freedom of speech, press, and assembly, release political prisoners, and promise not to destroy the Communist organization in the future. For its part, the Communists promised that "the Soviet areas will carry out a democratic system identical to all of China."¹⁶⁵ Nanjing seemed willing to agree to these general principles, though the negotiations that followed were marked by sharp debate on the size of the Red Army and the Soviet bases, the degree of national government support, and the designated field of battle.¹⁶⁶ Chiang Kai-shek also continued his vigorous military campaign against the Communists to improve his bargaining position or even eliminate his rivals. Nonetheless, for two parties still fighting a decade-long civil war, this proposal reflected the new context created by Japanese aggression and foreshadowed of the terms of the united front to come.

A WINDOW TO THE WORLD

While all of these crisscrossing negotiations were going on, a new actor suddenly appeared on the scene: a young American journalist looking for a scoop from Red China. Edgar Snow was a thirty-one-year-old newsman with eight years of experience in China. He had long been part of an international group of left-leaning journalists and activists alarmed by the rise of Japanese militarism and the worldwide threat of fascism. In 1935, he and his wife were living in Beijing, where Ed

taught journalism at Yenching University. Many of Snow's students were active in the anti-Japanese movement, and his home was a gathering place for young people who would organize the December 9 demonstrations for national unity in resistance to Japan. Snow was intimately familiar with the popularity of Marxist thought among the young, declaring with real evidence but characteristic exaggeration that among educated youth, "Lenin is almost worshipped, Stalin is by far the most popular foreign leader, Socialism is taken for granted as the future form of Chinese society."¹⁶⁷ Snow had long wished to visit the Communist bases and write a book about the movement. In 1936, contacts in Beijing and a visit to Mme. Sun Yat-sen finally produced the proper introductions. He traveled to Xi'an, where he met his intermediaries in Zhang Xueliang's headquarters, traveled in an NEA truck to Yan'an, then walked to Ansai, where he met Zhou Enlai in July. Several days travel on foot and a broken-down horse brought him to Bao'an, where he would remain until October, with an extensive side trip to Peng Dehuai's headquarters in the nearby Sino-Muslim (Hui) areas of Ningxia.¹⁶⁸

Snow's *Red Star Over China* is most remembered for the long interviews with Mao Zedong, which still provide the indispensable sources, cited in every biography, for Mao's early years. Snow's visit provided Mao his "first chance to speak to the world," and this young Missouri journalist would be his amanuensis.¹⁶⁹ Mao was not only speaking to the world through Snow—he was also speaking to China. On Snow's return, several of the interviews were published in the *China Weekly Review*, then translated in the Chinese press. The impact was substantial, as was the influence of *Red Star* when it was first translated and published in 1937, just before full-scale war with Japan broke out, and then in a fuller version in 1938.¹⁷⁰ When students flocked to Yan'an during the war, much of what they knew about Mao and Chinese communism came from reading Snow's work.

Placed in its proper historical context, Snow's account is nothing short of stunning. In 1936, Mao's Red Army was trapped in the desolate northwest corner of one of China's poorest provinces. Bao'an was a "ruin," the "dusty, poorly provisioned lair" of the Communists' "tiny state."¹⁷¹ Yet in this context, Snow found in Mao—"this peasant-born intellectual turned revolutionary"—"a certain force of destiny." Impressed by Mao's "native shrewdness," Snow discovered in the caves of Bao'an "an accomplished scholar of Classical Chinese, an omnivorous reader, a deep student of philosophy and history, a good speaker, a man with an unusual memory and extraordinary powers of concentration, an able writer, careless in his personal habits and appearance but astonishingly meticulous about details of duty, a man of tireless energy, and a military and political strategist of considerable genius." In Mao, Snow also discerned "a power of ruthless decision" and a capacity for the "dialectics of 'the long view.'"¹⁷²

It is important to recognize that at this time Mao was not officially the highest-ranking member of the party. That position was held by the secretary-general Zhang Wentian, and Zhang was usually the first signatory of party decisions in

this period. But there was no doubt in Snow's mind or anyone else's that Mao was already the preeminent authority in the party. At this time, Snow detected no "ritual of hero-worship," and that would come only later. There were still intense debates among the party leadership, and as Snow had heard but not witnessed, Mao was capable of considerable fury. Debates certainly did happen, but when they were over, this embattled rump of a party would come together again until the next struggle.¹⁷³

Snow was certainly a sympathetic witness of the Chinese Revolution, and his later rosy accounts of life in the PRC have left him vulnerable to widespread criticism. One influential critic has dismissed *Red Star* as a "conscious propaganda piece,"¹⁷⁴ another as a "monumental work of literary imagination."¹⁷⁵ Nonetheless, for all his political biases, Snow was also an accomplished reporter with years of experience in China. His is the only foreign journalist's account that predates the Xi'an Incident and the move of the Communist capital to Yan'an. *Red Star* is, therefore, a unique window on the brief but important Bao'an era of the revolution in Shaanbei. Read carefully in the context of other sources, Snow's book provides useful insights into this particular moment in history and is most valuable when it records what Snow personally observed.

Snow had traveled all over China, but he still found Shaanbei "one of the poorest parts of China I had seen." The only road fit for wheeled traffic ended at Yan'an; from there he traveled along narrow trails. The first town he reached was Ansai, one of the few county seats controlled by the Communists. It was "completely deserted . . . crumbling ruins," the result of a flood a decade earlier. This poor county north of Yan'an was also the headquarters of the eastern front, an indication of losses in the northeast and the limits of the reduced soviet base. Even here, Snow had to move on quickly to Bao'an, as local militia had followed him from the south. There was no machine industry, no electricity anywhere in the soviet area; lighting came from rapeseed oil lamps. In the "industrial" center in Wuqi, the machines were lathes, stampers, and sewing machines brought along the Long March or captured in Shanxi; and the arsenal was capable of producing only mines and hand grenades or repairing old weapons. The machinists all came from elsewhere, mostly the Yangzi valley. Educators described Shaanbei as "very backward" compared to the Jiangxi soviet, where the cultural level was higher with a population only 10 percent literate.¹⁷⁶

Although Snow reports that the majority of the small band that escorted him was from Shaanbei, it is striking that almost all of his interlocutors were outsiders. When he recounts a personal story, it typically begins with his informant's youth in Hunan, Fujian, Jiangxi, or occasionally Sichuan. Of the thirty-one interviews later published in his *Random Notes on Red China*, only one is with a local cadre.¹⁷⁷ Those with the confidence and authority to speak to a foreigner were the Long March veterans now running the show. Though voiceless on their own lives, the locals were not absent. We see, for example, the "child sentinels" who inspected

road passes. The local defense forces, armed with “spears, pikes and a few rifles,” practiced earsplitting war cries that were allegedly effective in night attacks on local militia. Everywhere there was propaganda: chalked slogans on village walls condemning landlords, militia, and traitors; and simple dramas that Snow found “wholly unsophisticated” but nonetheless effective. Two groups in particular responded to the Communist message, youth and women. When Snow writes, “As I penetrated deeper into the Soviet districts I was to discover in these red-cheeked ‘little Red devils’—cheerful, gay, energetic and loyal—the living spirit of an astonishing crusade of youth,” it is plausible to assume that these young people had been prepped to appear lively and happy in the presence of a foreign visitor. But it would be wrong to ignore a wealth of evidence that young people did indeed respond to the Communist message. Women, too, in part because so many men were in the army, were finding more opportunities to work and to participate in public life.¹⁷⁸

Snow’s account is also useful in confirming important aspects of the new soviet’s appeal that are not entirely consistent with the picture of a new democratic regime. This was, after all, a revolutionary movement, and it was based on revolutionary power. Taxes were largely eliminated, which was certainly popular, but was possible because the regime relied mainly on confiscations from the rich.¹⁷⁹ When Snow traveled to the newly “liberated” Muslim areas of Ningxia, he heard more complaints. The people suffered under the seesaw battles that brought conflicting demands from the competing armies, and even without taxes, feeding the Communists’ horses consumed precious fodder. Locals also resented the new prohibitions on opium and found the soviet currency worthless in the marketplace. Snow was appropriately skeptical that the Muslims believed the Communist promises of ethnic self-determination; and Peng Dehuai was frank in admitting that unless and until the local militia was neutralized, it was impossible to mobilize the population. While he was clearly uncomfortable with the process, Snow did not shrink from reporting the execution of a Guomindang tax collector after a mass trial during his Ningxia sojourn.¹⁸⁰

When Snow goes beyond what he saw and reports stories that he has heard, he is more vulnerable to Communist exaggeration. He reports, for example, that Liu Zhidan controlled eleven Shaanbei counties in 1932 and twenty-two in 1935, which is demonstrably false.¹⁸¹ He is overly credulous toward Communist claims of the size of their armies and the area they controlled. The Shaan-Gan-Ning soviet was certainly not the largest ever; the Red Army did not have twenty thousand men when Mao arrived; at most there were eight thousand, and certainly fifteen thousand recruits were not gained in the Shanxi campaign. Nor, to be sure, would the Red Army have ninety thousand men when the Fourth and Second Front Armies arrived.¹⁸² Snow was surely naive in seeing the people of Shaanbei as the “freest and happiest” in China,¹⁸³ but his account is remarkable evidence that even after the losses of the Long March and the undeniable defeat in Shanxi, Mao and the Communist leadership maintained a striking optimism in the tiny impoverished

soviet that they still controlled. That revolutionary optimism is reflected in secret internal party documents as much as in Mao's lengthy interviews with Snow.

These interviews and Snow's book served a number of different purposes. They unquestionably enhanced Mao's reputation in China and the world, and Mao's account of his early life provided a human element missing in most biographies of Communist leaders.¹⁸⁴ The dramatic account of the Long March fit a narrative that Mao was anxious to establish. We have seen the elite status Mao sought for Long March survivors, and as he told the story to Snow, he began promoting the idea of a book on the subject.¹⁸⁵ Most importantly, Snow provided a vehicle for Mao to reach both a domestic and an international audience with his new message of a broad united front for patriotic resistance to Japan. In a series of five interviews, Mao answered a wide range of questions about the purposes, terms, and reasons for the new united front policy. Most of his answers were directed at a domestic audience and related to the terms for an accommodation with the Nationalist Party, but to Snow he also stressed Japan's threat to other Pacific powers, and the hope that "farsighted" Americans would eventually join the struggle against Japanese fascism.¹⁸⁶ Mao clearly recognized the utility of a wider international audience.

A LAST GRASP FOR SOVIET AID

While Snow was assembling data for his bullish report on the revolutionary movement in Shaanbei, a very different report was dispatched to the Comintern. As Mao had frankly acknowledged on the Long March, the CCP was a branch of the Communist International; and Communists did not dissemble to the Comintern. As in any large and diverse organization, lower reporting levels might arrange facts to suit their purposes. Nonetheless, the considerable faith in the leading role and invaluable experience of the Soviet Union and in Stalin's wisdom led Communist leaders to stick close to the facts in their reports to Moscow. Furthermore, although Otto Braun, the Comintern's military representative, had been pretty much sidelined by this time, he was still in Bao'an—sometimes even playing tennis with Snow.¹⁸⁷ The long message to the Comintern was a request for substantial military assistance, and in that context the CCP dared not report anything that Braun could readily contradict.

The August 28 report began with a stark admission of the dire military situation. The eastern part of Shaanbei had been occupied by Tang Enbo, who controlled the fords to Shanxi and all the major towns, including the Communists' former headquarters in Wuyaobu. Tang led seven divisions and one brigade and was busy opening motor roads and constructing blockhouses. To the west and northwest, the Muslim warlord Ma Hongkui with his strong cavalry occupied the prosperous areas of Ningxia along the northern bend of the Yellow River, while conservative elements of the NEA cooperated on his southern flank. To the

southwest, one of Chiang Kai-shek's loyal generals, Hu Zongnan, had long been constructing a blockade line in southern Gansu to impede the Red Army's northern progress. In the spring of 1936, he had been dispatched to Hunan to confront the patriotic actions of the Southwest rebellion, but now he was rushing back to block He Long's Second and Zhang Guotao's Fourth Army's progress through Gansu. On the southern front, Zhang Xueliang's NEA maintained a tenuous cease-fire, but in all, 150 regiments with 150,000 men surrounded the Communist base.¹⁸⁸

The secure Communist base was now reduced to a few counties on the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia border. Contemporary reports list different places in this small and shrinking base, but it basically included Bao'an, Jingbian, and Dingbian Counties in the northwest corner of Shaanxi, plus Yanchi in neighboring Ningxia, and Huan-xian in Gansu.¹⁸⁹ To the Comintern, the party reported 400,000 people in their base, which certainly included guerrilla zones further east, but 30,000 were already in the Red Army, a higher ratio than in the former Jiangxi soviet.¹⁹⁰ Local forces were retreating before the NEA and local militia in the south; military setbacks led to defeatist rumors that the Red Army was finished; and rural cadres were criticized for fleeing before the enemy.¹⁹¹ Military defeats affected morale, and some soldiers and party cadres were "wavering," their unflinching resolve tested as the noose tightened around their small base.¹⁹² Two-thirds of the grain collected from local strongmen was devoted to feed the central state and army, leaving little for the local apparatus or any developmental efforts.¹⁹³

The report to the Comintern contained a detailed accounting of the Red Army's current strength. There were 8,000 soldiers in Mao's First Army and 6,000 in Xu Haidong's Fifteenth. The new locally recruited armies were the Twenty-Eighth with 1,400 men, the Twenty-Ninth with 1,200, and the Thirtieth with 1,300. Additional infantry, cavalry, artillery, security, and courier units totaled 3,350 men. The reported total of regular army troops was 21,000. This was slightly less than the 25,000 that the party had reported when radio contact with Moscow was restored in June, reflecting losses and defections during the summer.¹⁹⁴ In addition, there were 6,000 local defense forces and guerrillas. However, not all of these men were armed. The entire Red Army had something over 10,000 rifles, roughly one for every two soldiers in the regular army, and two for every five in the local forces. Beyond these basic infantry weapons, there was little: 100 heavy machine guns, 250 light machine guns with another 200 in storage (perhaps for lack of ammunition), sixteen mortars, and two mountain guns. If firearms were lacking, ammunition was a greater problem for any extended combat operation. In the regular army, each rifle had roughly forty bullets; local forces had about ten. The Red Army was heavily dependent on weapons captured from the enemy—which was one reason that Mao stressed battles of annihilation, in which entire enemy units would be captured or destroyed and their weapons and ammunition seized.¹⁹⁵

The report to the Comintern included figures on recruitment, but these are particularly problematic, for they indicate massive recruitment despite relatively

constant Red Army strength. The party reported 10,000 recruits from Shaanbei, 8,000 from Shanxi, and another 1,000 in the west—presumably Gansu and Ningxia.¹⁹⁶ This represents 19,000 new recruits out of a total Red Army strength of 21,000. It seems clear that the reported strength of the Red Army is the more credible figure. If 19,000 were indeed recruited, it is likely that many were quickly rejected as too old, weak, sick, or otherwise unsuited for combat. Families, after all, were reluctant to offer strong young men to the army. It is also likely that recruits who were not quickly dismissed often found ways to escape and return to their homes.¹⁹⁷ Finally, a significant number presumably perished in combat or from exhaustion and disease, as is common in any army. Whatever the cause, it is obvious that the large recruitment numbers did not indicate a general eagerness to join the revolution or result in any large increase in the size and strength of the Red Army.

The report to the Comintern was prepared in connection with an urgent request for financial and military assistance. As we have seen, for at least a year Mao had hoped to draw close to the Soviet border to enhance the technical and military capabilities of his army. In the spring, with the Red Army trapped in Shaanbei, morale was suffering. Mao responded to this crisis of confidence by arguing, with characteristic dialectics, that the party needed to believe in itself but, at the same time, that it was incorrect to reject help from one's friends.¹⁹⁸ In April, just as the Shanxi operation was stalling, he sought direct communication with the Soviet military to determine "whether or not they can provide rifles, ammunition, light and heavy machine guns, anti-aircraft guns, artillery, modern pontoon bridges, and radios."¹⁹⁹ The reference to river-crossing pontoons indicates that Mao was now considering the western route to the Soviet border, across the Yellow River as it made its great northern loop around Shaanxi. From crossing points in Gansu, the Red Army could either continue west along the Gansu corridor to Xinjiang or turn north to Dingyuaning in Ningxia, where they hoped to receive Soviet aid. The Ningxia route had been traveled by Feng Yuxiang and Deng Xiaoping on their return from the Soviet Union in 1927. Concrete planning began as soon as the Center was forced out of Wayaobu to its new base in Bao'an.

The western routes posed significant logistical and military challenges. Both itineraries involved long treks across arid deserts and open grasslands, and the few towns and cities along the route were well fortified. Even after the better-equipped First Army arrived, Communists in Shaanbei found it difficult to take walled towns. When the Red Army moved to Shaanxi's far northwest in June, they needed to take the border towns of Anbian and Dingbian. For this, explosives were needed to breach the walls, and Mao determined that these would have to come from "outside"—presumably from Zhang Xueliang's NEA.²⁰⁰ Anbian and Dingbian, however, were tiny towns compared to those that would have to be passed on the road to the Mongolian border. The western route was predicated on a collaboration with the NEA and the plan we have seen for a Northwest National Defense

Government. When this was presented to Moscow, however, the response was not encouraging.

The initial proposal was presented in June. A more detailed plan accompanied the long report of the military committee in August. The CCP now added airplanes and heavy artillery to its request, to attack the towns and forts along the route.²⁰¹ Of course, these military plans came at the same time that both the CCP and Moscow were pursuing separate but coordinated united front policies. Moscow had rejected the plan for a Northwest regional government, as it conflicted with its preference for a broad national defense government, preferably including Chiang Kai-shek. The Comintern also rejected admitting militarists like Zhang Xueliang into the party, though it encouraged the party to continue working with him.²⁰² Though Moscow strongly supported the efforts to form a united front with Chiang Kai-shek, it realized that as long as Chiang pursued the military elimination of the Communists, Moscow had to continue supporting the Red Army. The Comintern response to the request for military assistance did not come until September. Airplanes and heavy artillery were not included, and an approach through Xinjiang was rejected. However, if the Red Army could fight through Ningxia to Dingyuanying, the Soviets would provide fifteen to twenty thousand rifles, eighteen mortars, and appropriate ammunition.²⁰³ Though the response was far from what they had hoped, the CCP leaders were not in a position to bargain.

The party immediately set to making plans for the Ningxia campaign. Now, however, the Center had to address the issue of Mao's rival, Zhang Guotao, whose Fourth Army would be a significant addition to the Red Army. When Mao and Zhang Guotao had split in the summer of 1935, Mao moved north and Zhang moved south into western Sichuan. By the end of the year, Zhang realized his mistake, and, together with Mao's ally Zhu De, he again began moving north, joined by He Long's Second Front Army. The Comintern representative now in Bao'an, Lin Yuying, sent repeated telegrams assuring Zhang that Stalin and the Comintern had approved an approach to the Soviet Union. Zhang Guotao, however, was skeptical of the Ningxia plan. He had always preferred approaching the Soviet Union by moving west to Xinjiang. For justification, he was now able to cite Lin Yuying's May radiogram that "the International hopes that the Red Army will approach Outer Mongolia and Xinjiang."²⁰⁴ Mao briefly considered allowing the Fourth Army to move west while his First Army fought alone in Ningxia, but his commanders apparently persuaded him that neither army could accomplish its mission alone.²⁰⁵ The two armies would have to work together, with a plan to attack Ningxia in the winter, crossing the Yellow River after it had frozen.

Chiang Kai-shek, like the Chinese Communists and Moscow, was pursuing a policy of fighting and negotiating at the same time. Since late 1935 his agents had been reaching out to the Communists, and by September 1936, they invited Zhou Enlai to Hong Kong or Guangzhou for direct negotiations. In October the Communists proposed that Zhou and Chiang Kai-shek meet during the latter's

coming visit to Xi'an.²⁰⁶ At the same time, both sides were pursuing aggressive military campaigns to improve their negotiating position. In the spring of 1936, the Southwest challenge to Nanjing's conciliatory policies toward Japan had caused a redeployment of Hu Zongnan's army, which had garrisoned southern Gansu to block the rest of the Red Army from moving north. When the southwestern rebellion fizzled out in the summer, Mao urged the Second and Fourth Armies to move quickly, to join the First Army for the Ningxia campaign before Hu Zongnan returned to Gansu. Mao was so anxious for a successful reunion that he ordered clean uniforms for his troops to properly greet the new arrivals.²⁰⁷ However, the completion of the railway to Xi'an at the end of 1934 allowed Chiang to transfer his armies with unprecedented speed. By mid-September, Hu Zongnan's army was back in Xi'an and preparing to move west along the Xi'an-Lanzhou highway.²⁰⁸

Mao urgently radioed Zhang Guotao and Zhu De that Ningxia was the key; the Center had requested aid from the Soviets, including airplanes and artillery, and the reply had promised aid once they reached Ningxia. Mao did not mention that Moscow's reply had omitted the planes and big guns.²⁰⁹ Zhang was not convinced. Three days later he announced that one part of his army would stay in southern Gansu to block Hu Zongnan, while the main force would cross the Yellow River and fight across the Gansu corridor to Xinjiang. In October, 25,000 troops of the Fourth Army crossed the Yellow River and headed west across the arid land. It was a fatal mistake. In the months ahead, exposed in the open field, with little food or water, this West Route Army was decimated by Muslim cavalry from Qinghai. Their commanders abandoned the field and sneaked back to Yan'an. When a few hundred stragglers reached Xinjiang in May 1937, Molotov denied entry to the Soviet Union. In the end, 407 survivors were admitted for military training in Russia. In all, some 20,000 men, half of the entire Red Army, were lost in this western campaign.²¹⁰

For a brief period in the late fall of 1936, Mao tried to salvage the Ningxia campaign. The population of Ningxia was largely Muslim, and it was ruled by the implacably hostile Muslim warlord Ma Hongkui. Since the summer, the Communists had attempted to appeal to this population with promises of Hui and Mongol self-determination based on Soviet nationalities policy.²¹¹ There was also a substantial Society of Brothers population along this border region, and Liu Zhidan's early revolutionary movement had been able to use his own membership and connections in the Brotherhood. Now the party Center renewed efforts to court the Brotherhood and use it to infiltrate Ma Hongkui's army.²¹² There is no evidence that either of these policies was effective, and despite Mao's praise for the "courageous sacrifices" of his troops, Peng Dehuai was unable to break through Ma Hongkui's defenses.²¹³ Soon he was forced to move key units south to assist the surviving units of the Second and Fourth Armies as they fought through to the north. Hu Zongnan, however, was able to seize the Yellow River ford and cut off the Fourth Army units in Gansu, then send his own units ahead to occupy

Dingyuaning.²¹⁴ The final straw came when the Soviet Union decided that a Japanese advance in Inner Mongolia and reports of Japanese spies in Dingyuaning made it too risky to send aid by that route. By November, the Ningxia plan was abandoned, and Mao was forced to settle for Moscow's offer of \$500,000 in financial assistance, with the first installment of \$150,000 sent through Song Qingling and reaching Bao'an in December.²¹⁵

Even with the addition of the Second and Fourth Armies, Chiang Kai-shek now had a much-reduced Red Army trapped in the desolate northwest corner of Shaanbei. The total Red Army was less than 40,000 soldiers, many without weapons. The Long March survivors from the Second and Fourth Armies included many elderly and wounded soldiers and cadres and some children. In the Fourth Army alone, Mao reported 640 of these.²¹⁶ Meanwhile, Shaanxi's Wei River heartland was experiencing unprecedented progress. By 1931 a motor road from Xi'an to Shaanxi's eastern border and the extension of the railroad from Henan reduced the trip to Beijing to as little as seventy-six hours.²¹⁷ Gone were the days when a "backward" Shaanxi was farther from the former capital than London. By 1935, the railroad had reached Xi'an, allowing Chiang Kai-shek's troops to rapidly redeploy from the south. With the railway and trucks on the new roads, commercial development proceeded apace. Aided by new irrigation projects and spurred by commercial opportunity, cotton became a major crop in the Wei River valley, sold to the textile factories on the coast, while grain imports entered from the North China plain. Running water, electricity, new hotels, and paved roads modernized the face of Xi'an, and the first factories were established. Xi'an and the Guanzhong plain were quickly developing toward their wartime role as the economic center of the Northwest.²¹⁸

With Guanzhong growing rapidly and the Red Army weakened in the north, Chiang Kai-shek's bargaining position stiffened. Chen Lifu insisted that the Red Army be limited to 3,000 soldiers and that its officers be removed and, as was common for Guomindang members under discipline, forced to go abroad.²¹⁹ Through much of 1936, growing anti-Japanese sentiment had strengthened the Communist hand and left Chiang on the defensive. Now the tide had turned. Hu Zongnan was ordered to press the attack to finish off the Communists. Confident that at last victory was in sight, he advanced quickly across the desolate hills of eastern Gansu, where the villages were empty and the water in the streams too salty to drink. His parched and famished troops fell into a Communist trap, ambushed by Peng Dehuai with heavy losses. Hu's army fell back to regroup, and though the Red Army suffered substantial casualties as well, for the moment at least, Mao's revolution had survived.²²⁰

SAVED BY XI'AN

From Zhang Xueliang's appointment to head the anti-Communist campaign in the Northwest, his fate and that of the Communist revolution were inextricably

entwined. Mao's first battles in Shaanbei were fought against Zhang's armies. Northeast Army captives from those battles played a critical role in negotiating the first cease-fire. Zhang's neutrality was essential for the Red Army's expedition into Shanxi, and the subsequent negotiations between the two armies led to the plan for the Northwest National Defense Government and the Ningxia campaign. The extent of Zhang Xueliang's collaboration with the Communists is remarkable for a general who had always been loyal to Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalist Party. The documentary record for that partnership is nonetheless incontrovertible, and Yang Kuisong, the preeminent historian of this era, is persuasive that Communist Party historians have gone out of their way to conceal this record to protect Zhang Xueliang's reputation while he spent his life under Guomindang house arrest in Taiwan.²²¹

Zhang's collaboration with the Communists becomes more understandable when we recognize that he was hardly alone in responding to the Communists' united front appeals. Southern militarists, Guomindang operatives, and even Chiang Kai-shek's sister- and brother-in-law also sent representatives to Moscow or Bao'an. Especially as the split between pro- and anti-Japanese factions of the Nanjing government intensified in 1935–36, many in the South and Southwest were prepared to challenge Chiang's policies. In this context of rising patriotic sentiment, the Soviet Union was the most likely source of military assistance against Japan. Zhang's dealings with the Communists, even his request to join the Communist Party, must be understood as part of a search for military support if he had to cut his ties with Nanjing. As we have seen above, Zhang knew that Chiang Kai-shek, through his representatives, was also talking to the Soviets. There was no reason Zhang should not do the same. Finally, of course, we should remember that when full-scale war with Japan broke out in 1937, the one country that provided substantial military aid to China was precisely the Soviet Union.²²²

By December 1936, however, the Red Army's Ningxia campaign had collapsed in failure. Hopes had evaporated for a broad anti-Japanese front in the Northwest, tied to and armed by the Soviets. Now the Communists' remaining armies were much reduced in size and strength and all concentrated in a small base on the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia border. Mao Zedong made a final appeal to Chiang Kai-shek's patriotism, condemning him for concentrating his forces against the Communists while Japan was invading Inner Mongolia.²²³ The appeal went unanswered. Chiang's generals, Hu Zongnan and Tang Enbo, controlled the fronts to the east and west. North of Shaanbei was the Gobi Desert, and Japan was advancing from the east. The only quiet front was the NEA front to the south. On December 6, 1936, Chiang Kai-shek flew to Xi'an to urge Zhang Xueliang to press his attack on the Communists or be removed. Six days later, Zhang Xueliang's soldiers overpowered Chiang's bodyguards and took the Generalissimo captive. With that decisive act, the history of Shaanbei was transformed. After tense negotiations in the weeks that followed, Chiang gave verbal assent to end the civil war, opening the door to Chinese unity against continuing Japanese aggression.

The dramatic story of the Xi'an Incident has been much told and need not be repeated here. The incident unquestionably changed the course of Chinese history.²²⁴ It was, however, the product not of events in Shaanbei but of developments in the nation as a whole. In that respect, it was the culmination of the progressive eclipse of local agency that we have seen through this study. In Shaanbei, the revolution was in peril. But on the national scene, Chiang Kai-shek's anti-Communist crusade was also in crisis. In 1936, the press carried daily headlines of Japanese aggression and valiant Chinese resistance in what is now Inner Mongolia.²²⁵ The Japanese promotion of an autonomy movement in North China aroused strenuous Chinese objections to partition of the country. Then on November 22, Nanjing authorities arrested seven prominent leaders of the National Salvation Movement, provoking further nationwide protests. The arrests looked particularly impolitic when, three days later, Japan and Germany signed the Anti-Comintern Pact.²²⁶ Given the inflamed state of Chinese public opinion, it is hardly surprising that when Chiang Kai-shek came to Xi'an to press his anti-Communist campaign, he was met with student demonstrators from Northeast University, which had recently relocated to the city. It was Chiang Kai-shek's suggestion that such patriotic student demonstrations should be dispersed with force that precipitated his kidnapping on December 12.²²⁷

In Shaanbei the initial reaction was ecstatic. In Bao'an, there was a "huge celebration," and Mao Zedong called for a public trial of Chiang Kai-shek.²²⁸ At his local headquarters, Gao Gang's announcement to a mass meeting was greeted with enthusiastic cries to "Execute Chiang Kai-shek."²²⁹ To Moscow the CCP forwarded an ambitious plan for a united front of the Red Army, Zhang Xueliang, Yan Xishan, and other generals, with the hope that T. V. Soong and others anti-Japanese elements would join their cause and the Soviet Union would render assistance.²³⁰ Moscow was alarmed. The Comintern suspected that the Chinese Communists were in on the plot, and the Soviet press blamed the kidnapping on a Japanese conspiracy. These fears were exacerbated by suspicions, inevitable in Stalin's Russia, that Trotskyite agents were somehow involved.²³¹ After Stalin conferred with the Comintern leaders and Molotov, a radiogram instructed the CCP to work for a peaceful solution, and Zhou Enlai was dispatched to join the negotiations in Xi'an.²³²

In Xi'an, the plotters had seized, in addition to Chiang Kai-shek, several of his leading generals and the Guomindang governor of Shaanxi, Shao Lizi. The city was entirely in the hands of the mutineers, and enthusiasm for an end to the civil war and a united front against Japan was high. Nationwide, however, a contrary atmosphere prevailed. The Xi'an Incident provoked a nationwide storm of protest against the "mutiny" by Zhang Xueliang and his Northwest Army partner Yang Hucheng, and near-unanimous support for Chiang Kai-shek. The Guomindang divided, however, on how the Generalissimo was to be saved. Initially, real power fell to the "pro-Japanese" faction around the minister of war He Yingqin, who

mobilized the army to attack and bomb the mutinous troops around Xi'an. As Nanjing's forces advanced from the east, and with Chiang's loyal supporter Hu Zongnan in Gansu to the west, Zhang Xueliang had to withdraw his own troops from eastern Gansu and Shaanbei and asked the Communists to move south to replace them. Mao and his military commanders engaged in a confused radio consultation, with some favoring a return to the Ningxia plan, and Mao proposing a typically aggressive strategy that involved advancing quickly beyond the Guomindang lines in Henan and threatening Nanjing—once again displaying his intense desire to escape his impoverished refuge in Shaanbei. To prepare for this option, Xu Haidong's forces were sent to prepare for military operations in southern Shaanxi, where they had left a small guerrilla force when passing through the area in 1934. However, most Red Army forces moved only as far as Sanyuan, occupying more populated Wei River areas that afforded access to provisions and fresh recruits for the army.²³³ This represented a vast expansion of the soviet base—a major recovery from the precarious position the Communists found themselves in just a month earlier.

On December 20, the political configuration on the Guomindang side changed when Song Ziwen (T. V. Soong) flew to Xi'an, soon joined by his sister, Mme. Chiang Kai-shek. They represented the "pro-British-American" faction in the Nanjing government, and the rivals of He Yingqin, whose military assault on Xi'an put the Generalissimo's life in danger. Song took over the negotiations with Zhang Xueliang and Zhou Enlai, eventually gaining Chiang's verbal agreement to a vague set of principles for an end to civil war and a reorganized united front government against Japan. Yang Hucheng and the radical officers in Xi'an were skeptical, doubting that Chiang would uphold such a vague set of promises. But Zhang Xueliang was insistent and flew off with the Generalissimo and Mme. Chiang on Christmas Day, 1936.²³⁴

Chiang emerged from the crisis more popular than ever and returned to a tumultuous welcome in Nanjing. Zhang Xueliang, for his part, was the main loser. Expecting to receive the sort of peremptory punishment given to previous opponents of the Generalissimo, he was instead put on trial, convicted of insubordination, removed from his command, and put under house arrest that would last long after the Guomindang was driven from the Chinese Mainland. The trial and punishment of Zhang Xueliang provoked a further crisis in Xi'an, as radicals called for revenge against Nanjing while the moderate NEA commanders sought to ease the conflict in hopes of gaining Zhang's release. The Communists, anxious to consolidate their gains in the north and advance the united front, supported the moderates.

When the Xi'an Incident broke out in December, the NEA withdrew from Yan'an, and the Red Army occupied the city, which would remain the Communist capital for the next decade. The final act of the Xi'an drama came in February, as Chiang Kai-shek sought to bring the region under firm Nanjing control. The NEA

officers resisted, demanding the return of their commander. As the crisis escalated, radical officers assassinated Wang Yizhe and other senior commanders, precisely the men who had negotiated the initial truce with the Communists a year earlier. Divisions within the Xi'an mutineers provided the opportunity for Nanjing to reassert control of Xi'an and the Wei River valley, and many of the radicals fled to join the Communists.²³⁵

In Shaanbei, the revolution entered a new stage. The military threat in the north was much reduced. To the west, Hu Zongnan was closer to T. V. Soong's faction with its support of the united front; and to the east Tang Enbo led much of his army to the front against Japan in Suiyuan. Troops loyal to Nanjing occupied Xi'an, but Yang Hucheng withdrew to Sanyuan, providing a buffer between them and the Communists in the north.²³⁶ As a reward for CCP cooperation in the resolution of the crisis, and apparently feeling guilty for its failure to support the West Route Army in Gansu, Moscow increased its offer of financial assistance to \$800,000.²³⁷ The revolution in Shaanbei was certainly not secure. The Guomindang still controlled most of the major towns, the local militia remained hostile to the Communists, and armed conflict with the guerrillas was common as they attacked local strongmen for grain to support the revolution.²³⁸ But the Xi'an Incident had ended Chiang's anti-Communist offensive and provided the Communists a new connection to the patriotic student movement in the cities. Many of those students sought out the Red Army units now within walking distance of Xi'an. What they found was not so different from what Edgar Snow had witnessed in Bao'an. In the words of a foreign journalist, "There are gaiety, comradeship, a touch of recklessness, for the average age of the Red Armies is probably under twenty; but there are also a strength and a self-reliance that are not common among Chinese brought up in the old family traditions."²³⁹ Others put a slightly more sinister spin on the same scene, seeing "a blend of sweet reasonableness with desperate declarations, of cheerful care-free countenances with sinister and terrifying aspects."²⁴⁰ One can well imagine passionate young students responding to this combination of youthful enthusiasm and resolute determination. But there was still a long road to travel before the Shaan-Gan-Ning base was secure.