The Long March

The Long March of 1934–1935, one of the seminal events of the twentieth century, had far-reaching implications not only for China but also for the rest of the world. Its most significant outcome, aside from fostering a Chinese Communist Party independent of the Soviet Union, was the rise of Mao Zedong as the party’s primary leader and theorist.

The 9,600 kilometer (6,000-mile) journey of retreat of the Chinese Communists in 1934 and 1935 has been glorified in party lore as the Long March. During the Nationalist-Communist Civil War, Communist forces marched from southeast to northwest China, across Hunan, Guangxi, Guizhou, Yunnan, Sichuan, and Shaanxi, to establish the Communist revolutionary base in an area beyond the control of the Nationalist troops under Chiang Kai-shek (1887–1975), leader of the Guomindang (Nationalist Party). Historians consider the Long March a landmark in the history of modern China. This was the time when the Chinese Communist movement started to forge its own destiny, independent of the Bolsheviks and other foreign revolutionaries. And this was the time that Mao Zedong (1893–1976) became the undisputed leader of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

The Jiangxi Soviet

The CCP was founded in the early 1920s. In 1924 the Guomindang agreed to form a united front with the CCP in return for Soviet aid. But in 1927, after successfully subduing warlords in the north, the Guomindang launched a bloody purge against all Communists in areas under the Guomindang’s control. Communist cadres were forced underground. In the early 1930s, the Communists had about fifteen bases in rural south-central China, but the purge had shattered their links with the central committee in Shanghai. The CCP, then led by a group of Moscow-trained Chinese students known as the Twenty-Eight Bolsheviks, depended heavily on support from the Soviet Union. In 1931 the central committee moved its headquarters from Shanghai to Jiangxi Province in northern China and declared the local government a soviet (an elected government council of the CCP). Mao’s ideology came to influence the Jiangxi Soviet, which was originally dominated by the Moscow-trained leaders, many of whom were defenders of the Soviet Union’s concept of revolution by urban workers. Mao believed that the revolution in China could be won with the help of the peasants, who made up the bulk of the population. Under the military threat of the Nationalists, the Chinese Communists ignored their Soviet advisers and forged their own tactics. Mao and his followers gained the support of the peasants by expropriating and redistributing land in the soviet region.
Between 1930 and 1934, the Nationalists launched a series of military campaigns against the Communists in an attempt to wipe out their bases. Using guerrilla warfare tactics developed by Mao, the Communists held off four campaigns. In October 1933, the Nationalists launched a fifth campaign. With guidance from German advisers, Chiang Kai-shek mobilized some 700,000 men who built a series of cement blockhouses around the Communist camps to barricade the soviet areas in Jiangxi. About a million people died because of the ensuing economic blockade and later military actions. The Communists switched tactics from guerrilla warfare to positional warfare, the strategy of defending military bases. But against the better-armed Nationalist forces, the Communists suffered severe losses. By mid-1934, the Red Army, the name of the Communists forces at that time, was defeated and in retreat. Also in 1934, the Communist central committee removed Mao from CCP leadership.

**Retreat**

On 15 October 1934, 86,000 Communist military personnel, along with 30,000 party officials and civilian party members, broke through the blockade and fled westward. At first, there was confusion over the direction and leadership of the retreat. Eventually, Zhu De (1886–1976) and Zhou Enlai (1898–1976) assumed leadership, and Mao’s guerilla tactics were again employed. Along the way the Communists were frequently bombarded and attacked by the Nationalist forces and suffered great losses. The demoralized Communists reached Zunyi, Guizhou Province, in early 1935. While there, Mao gathered support from his followers and defeated the Soviet-trained faction in a session of the CCP Politburo, which, by chance, lacked a quorum. Mao became the actual leader of the Communist Chinese Party, a party now under complete Chinese control.

The Long March continued as the Communists proceeded toward Shaanxi. Mao’s Jiangxi contingent was later joined by the Second Front Army headed by He Long (1896–1969) from its base in Hunan, and the Fourth Front Army under Zhang Guodao (1897–1979) from its base in the Sichuan-Shaanxi border area. Following a power struggle between Mao and Zhang, Zhang moved his group toward southwestern China. Mao marched his troops toward northern Shaanxi, northwest China, where Gao Gang (1902–1955) had established a Communist base. Most of the route was mountainous, with few motor roads and resources. To maintain marching speed along the route, the Communists discarded their heavy equipment and even food and medicines.

Over the yearlong, 9,600 kilometer march, the Communist troops crossed eighteen mountain ranges and
twenty-four rivers, averaging about twenty-seven kilometers (seventeen miles) a day. When the Long March started from Jiangxi, there were about 100,000 followers. Many new recruits joined along the way, but some left to mobilize the peasantry, some died on the way, and others simply abandoned the endeavor. By the time the march reached Zunyi in January 1935, 50 percent to 80 percent who had started out were lost. When these survivors finally reached Shaanxi in October 1935, only the leaders and a small number of the troops remained.

In mid-1936, the remnants of several Red armies gathered in northern Shaanxi and set up their headquarters in Yenan. By December the Red Army had grown to 30,000 men. The army, now secure and defended in the mountains and difficult terrain of Shaanxi, regrouped and planned its strategy against the Nationalists.

A Lasting Legacy

Perhaps the most significant outcome of the Long March was the ascendancy of Mao as paramount theorist and leader of the CCP. During this time Mao began to develop his unique version of Communist theory, which included a dramatic changes in party-mobilization policies. His views overrode the Soviet orthodoxy of an urban-based revolution and became the CCP’s strategy of establishing itself in the countryside. The Communists had gained much support from peasants along the route of the march. From then on CCP doctrine decreed that imported Marxism was less important to China than China’s unique history, culture, and economy. Mao believed that the Chinese Revolution should be led by the huge rural population, not the small number of urban workers.

The Long March helped launch the careers of new and strong national political leaders. Most of the later prominent leaders of the CCP—including Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997), Zhou Enlai, Liu Shaoqi (1898–1969), Zhu De, and Lin Piao (1906–1971)—participated in the march. After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, these Long March veterans became top-ranking political leaders.

The establishment of the CCP’s new base in northern Shaanxi in 1935 had significant implications for Nationalist-CCP relations and for the War of Resistance against Japan (1937–1945, known outside China as the Second Sino-Japanese War). The base was surrounded by desert on the west and the Huang (Yellow) River on the east. Although the topography and the lack of motor roads in the region made Shaanxi a defensible area, a local shortage of food and other resources made the new base vulnerable to Nationalists attack. But when the war with Japan broke out, the northwest became an important strategic base from which a war of resistance was organized. The Long March had inflamed Chinese nationalism and inspired Chinese troops in the face of advancing Japanese armies. Ultimately, and most important, the Long March helped to transform and consolidate the Chinese Communist Party’s strength and influence inside and outside China.

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Further Reading