

Militia and the 1926-27 National Revolution in Hunan

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Understandings of the Chinese National Revolution in 1926-1927 often see differences in emphasis on the use of military force as a defining issue both distinguishing Nationalist and Communist Party approaches to revolution at this time and determining the outcome of the initial struggle between them. On one hand, the Nationalist Party under the leadership of Chiang Kai-shek focused mainly on a military campaign against warlord enemies—the Northern Expedition—as a means of achieving political power and carrying out national unification. On the other hand, Communist Party leaders and other leftist activists focused more on social revolution—organizing workers and peasants against their class enemies—as a means of creating a new society dedicated to serving the laboring masses. Ideologically predisposed to see social organization as the primary basis for political power, the conventional wisdom assumed, the Communists were largely willing to leave the organization of the revolutionary army in Chiang’s hands. They were soon to regret the folly of this decision. Reacting against a social revolution that he saw as undermining his military campaign and his goal of unified political power, Chiang used his control over superior military force both to suppress the mass organizations that were meant to serve as the base of political power for the laboring classes and to purge the Communists and their fellow travelers from the Nationalist Party and the new Nationalist government. This ended the United Front between the two parties and defeated any hope for the immediate realization of social revolution.

For Communist historians, this “betrayal” of the Nationalist Revolution by Chiang Kai-shek was not merely important for its immediate outcome but in providing an important lesson

for the Communist Party as it sought to find a new path to power in the wake of this disaster. Even while condemning Chiang for putting too much emphasis on military force, Communist Party leadership is also criticized for paying too little attention to the importance of military force to political power, in essence creating a situation that allowed Chiang to crush the social revolution with his armies. Correcting this error was the realization best expressed by Mao Zedong statement that, “political power comes from the barrel of the gun.” The formation of the Red Army, as the military arm of Communist political power, was the important response to this lesson.

Largely absent from this conventional analysis, however, is any recognition of another struggle over the organization of, and control over, military force that played an equally important role in the National Revolution, albeit focusing not on regular armies but on local militia. This struggle showed that the advocates of social revolution were not in fact deluded into thinking that unarmed masses could carry out the massive social transformation they envisioned simply by sheer force of numbers or political pressure. An examination of the National Revolution in Hunan province reveals that leading activists, including Mao Zedong, insisted on the establishment of a political monopoly over military force at the local level by revolutionary mass organizations. Rather than being unique, though, Mao’s concerns were in fact grounded in a broader revolutionary critique of local militia in this period. Civil war and the growth of banditry in the decade before the National Revolution had led to the rapid expansion of militia in provinces such as Hunan, mainly in the form of standing militia forces supported by local taxation. As these forces grew in size, though, they also provided new opportunities for corruption and abuses of power by militia leaders. As the National Revolutionary Army entered Hunan in 1926, revolutionary leaders in general were acutely aware that local militia under the

control of “local bullies and evil gentry” presented a potential threat to the establishment of revolutionary power in the countryside. Therefore the takeover and reorganization of militia was from the beginning an essential feature of the revolutionary agenda for activists of all stripes.

There was, however, a division within the revolutionary camp as to how this militia organization was to take place. Initially the new revolutionary provincial government in Hunan proposed a largely statist approach, seeking to eliminate local abuses by increasing official and bureaucratic supervision. Although attacking abuses by local elites, the goal was not class struggle per se but remaking militia into true “community” organizations benefiting the people as a whole. In contrast, following the establishment of peasant and worker associations, and the increasing dominance of these organizations over local government affairs, social revolution activists sought to remake local militia into “peasant self-defense corps” and “worker pickets” as a means of establishing class-based military power. In the end, then, the struggle for the control of local militia did not just pit revolutionaries against counter-revolutionary elites, but also involved competing statist and class-based visions of revolution. In the end, then, this struggle over militia organization reflected in a microcosm the tensions between the revolutionary approaches of the Nationalist and Communist Parties that would ultimately end in the rupture of the United Front.

While the struggle over militia organization within the National Revolution in Hunan shows that Communist Party activists were not inattentive to the issue of military power, it complicates rather than overturns the conventional analysis of the role of military force in the defeat efforts to carry out social revolution. In the end, the organization of local militia under the control peasant and worker associations (and by extension the Communist Party were no match for the better armed and trained regular army. The decision to organize the Red Army may not

have been the result of a newfound appreciation for the importance of military force per se, but the realization that local militia alone would never be sufficient for the success of revolutionary power. At the same time, while CCP activists would continue to promote class-based militia as one aspect of their revolutionary struggle, the statist approach to militia organization emerged in this same period as a key component of Nationalist efforts to gain control over the Chinese countryside and suppress Communist insurgency.

The National Revolution and Statist Militia Reforms

The rapid expansion of militia in Hunan in the early Republican period was a natural response to constant threats to local order brought on by recurring civil war and a concurrent explosion of banditry. Ironically, the expansion of regular armies in the warlord period offered less rather than more security for local communities. On one hand, these communities often found themselves preyed upon by weakly controlled garrison troops or by defeated or disbanded soldiers.¹ On the other hand, military commanders became less willing to expend their “military capital” in ways that brought them no direct benefit, proclaiming at times that the military should not be relied on to preserve local order.² Although the expansion of militia was often a purely local initiative addressing specific local needs, more often than not the establishment of militia was also actively promoted by a range of state authorities, military and civil, at nearly every level

¹Acts of violence committed by soldiers against civilian populations, known as *bingzai* (兵災) or “military disasters,” were a common feature of this era. See Edward A. McCord, “Military Atrocities in Warlord China,” in Kai Filipiak, ed., *Civil-Military Relations in Chinese History. From Ancient China to the Communist Takeover* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015). [Or use MC article?]

²In early 1926, the commander of the Hunan Army 2nd Division called a meeting of magistrates from his six-county garrison area reminding them of their duty, among other things, to organize militia as a defense against banditry. Although noting the protection provided by his army, he noted that military forces could not long garrison any one area and might be mobilized at any time, making them unreliable. With effective militia organization, though, localities could avoid bandit disasters even with no military support. *Dagongbao* [L’Impartial] (Changsha), 25 January 1926.

as the best means of restoring order in a troubled time.³ The ultimate result of the combination of haphazard local efforts and official promotions was a proliferation of militia forces of various types, organized around a range of geographical territories or administrative units, and appearing under a confusing array of names.⁴

Although militia were intended to be a beneficial force, as loci of local power they could also wreak havoc on local communities. Militia regulations traditionally called on gentry to take charge of managing militia, on the assumption, or perhaps hope, that the resulting militia would truly serve community interests.⁵ Instead, the increasing importance of militia in local power structures actually opened the way for abuses by militia forces and corruption by militia leaders. This was particularly true as the dominant form of militia increasingly became standing forces of full-time militiamen armed with guns, rather than the lightly armed part-time mass militia often preferred by official promoters.⁶ By the 1920s common militia critiques charged militia leaders as having become “authorities unto themselves” (*gezi weizheng* 各自為政) who did not hesitate to execute suspects without authorization, enriched themselves with unnecessary taxes and fines, used their power to carry out private revenge, and colluded with bandits.⁷

Not surprisingly, the rise in militia abuses was met with recurring calls for militia reform,

³ The Beiyang warlord of Hunan from 1917 to 1920, Zhang Jingyao issued repeated orders for the organization of militia. *Dagongbao*, 27 June and 26 September 1918; *Hunan zhengbao*, 1918: 22 (27-28 October), p. 61. After Zhang’s ouster from Hunan, successive Hunanese governors, provincial assemblies, government agencies, and even local military commanders. *Dagongbao*, 14 and 21 July 1920, 16 November 1920, 2 December 1921, 1 March 1923, 12 February 1924, 25-26 February 1925, 7 April 1925. 29 January 1926.

⁴ One newspaper commentary noted the wide diversity of militia of varying sizes appearing under the names *aihutuan* 挨戶團, *baoweituan* 保衛團, and *tuanfang* 團防. Dd63.

⁵ (Cite 19th C examples?)

⁶ [Could add examples of size of militia forces in some cases]

⁷ See for example, *Dagongbao*, 9 March 1922, 20 August 1922, 1 March 1923, and 7 April 1925.

often expressed in terms of a need for more unified and centralized government control.⁸

Unfortunately, the disorderly political conditions of the warlord era stood in the way of any concentrated effort at militia reform. This situation did, however, set the stage for a more expansive effort to reform, reorganize, and even re-conceptualize militia as a local self-defense force under the auspices of the 1926-1927 National Revolution.

The opening of Hunan as the northern front of the Northern Expedition, as the military spearhead for the National Revolution, originated in an internal military struggle in the province. In March 1926, Tang Shengzhi, commander of one of Hunan's four army divisions and military "superintendent" (duban 督辦) of South Hunan, denounced his former patron, the Hunan governor Zhao Hengti, in a bid to take his place at the head of Hunan's government. Caught unprepared, on March 12 Zhao resigned his position and Tang took his place as Hunan governor. This coup did not sit well, however, with Hunan's other commanders. While Zhao raised support from the northern warlord Wu Peifu, another Hunan division commander, Ye Kaixin, united the rest of the Hunan Army to force Tang from the governorship. On May 3, Tang abandoned the provincial capital at Changsha to return his base in South Hunan, leaving Ye in charge of the Hunan government. At that point Tang sought to acquire his own external support by allying himself with the growing power of the Nationalist Party government in Canton. In early June, Tang announced his support for the National Revolution and received appointments as the commander of the National Revolutionary 8th Army and Northern Expedition Front Commander. With this new backing, on July 12, Tang successfully led his troops to reclaim the provincial capital. With this victory, the National Revolution arrived in Hunan.⁹

The appearance of militia in the initial military struggles between Tang and Zhao, and

⁸ See for example, *Dagongbao*, 14 January 1924, and 7 April 1925.

⁹ [Cite *Hunan jinbainian dashi jishu*, Boorman, Tang Xibian in HWZ3 or others]

Tang and Ye largely followed patterns that had evolved over many previous warlord conflicts. Both Tang and Ye took turns ordering counties to mobilize standing and mass militia for the preservation of local order, which their own armies could no longer guarantee.¹⁰ Such orders were hardly necessary, though, as many communities drew their own conclusions that an additional expansion of militia was needed for local self-protection amid this new military conflict.¹¹ Meanwhile, militia forces had to deal with the “normal” challenges arising from such military conflicts—such as the danger of having their guns seized by combatants, the threat of pillaging by defeated or disbanded troops, and the menace presented by raiding bandits posing as legitimate military units.¹² In some cases, such challenges led to the resignations of militia leaders who no longer felt up to meeting the increasing burdens of militia management.¹³ To the extent that these same challenges confirmed the importance of militia as a local resource, though, they may have also sharpened internal elite struggles over militia leadership.¹⁴ The expanded role for militia in local society meanwhile again drew attention to corruption, and renewed calls for militia reform.¹⁵ The initial churn of the Tang-Zhao and Tang-Ye conflict however simply reconfirmed the general trajectory of militia development that had accompanied the emergence of warlordism without prompting any serious effort to deal with militia abuses.

¹⁰ *Dagongbao*, 27 April and 22 May 1926.

¹¹ Reports on such militia expansions came from many counties: Liuyang—*Dagongbao*, 10 May 1926; Daoxian—*Dagongbao*, 11 May 1926; Changsha—*Dagongbao*, 17 and 23 May, 5 June 1926; Ningxiang—*Dagongbao*, 21 May 1926; Xiangtan—*Dagongbao*, 29 May 1926; Lixian—*Dagongbao*, 8 June 1926; Yuanling—*Dagongbao*, 28 June 1926.

¹² *Dagongbao*, 15, 17, 23 and 26 May 1926.

¹³ *Dagongbao*, 26 and 30 May, 6 June 1926.

¹⁴ Intense struggles over militia leadership occurred in both Anhua and Pingjiang counties in this period. *Dagongbao*, 28 May, 4, 12 and 17 June 1926.

¹⁵ *Dagongbao*, 18 June 1926. The call for militia reform in this case came from a military commander serving under Ye Kaixin. The frequent attention of military commanders to the issue of militia reform often seems driven by the desire to avoid responsibility for the maintenance of local order themselves.

The normalcy of this trajectory was shaken upon Tang Shengzhi's return to Changsha on July 12, 1926 at the head of the National Revolution's Northern Expeditionary forces. One of Tang's first acts as he reclaimed the Hunan governor's seat, just ten days after the entry into Changsha, was to order a major overhaul of the province's local militia.¹⁶ A number of concerns may have driven Tang and his National Party allies to deal more seriously with this issue than previous provincial administrations. At the most basic level, the maintenance of local order might have been seen as important to prevent any distraction that might stand in the way of the continuation of the Northern Expedition. On a higher plain, the revolutionary ideology of the National Revolution, with its promise to improve the people's livelihood, no doubt drew more attention to the problem of militia corruption and abuse even as it argued for stronger state penetration of local society to address such problems. At the same time, militia abuses provided a case in point for the revolutionary critique, largely shared by Nationalist and Communist party members, that saw "local bullies evil gentry" (土豪劣紳) as the main obstacle to the revolutionary transformation of Chinese society in a way parallel to way in which warlordism blocked the path to national strength and unity.¹⁷ Control of militia forces by self-interested local bullies and evil gentry became an accepted explanation for both their corruption and ineffectiveness. Still seeing a role for militia to play in local affairs, Tang's proposal sought to regularize and unify this militia at the county level and improve leadership through stronger state control. Besides being a pragmatic solution, the top-down and bureaucratic approach of Tang's reforms also reflected a statist perspective that was well in keeping with the revolutionary perspective of his Nationalist Party affiliates.

Tang's specific justification for militia reform repeated some of the common complaints

¹⁶ *Dagongbao* (Changsha), 1926 July 22.

¹⁷ [Add citations on anti-warlord/anti-LBEG discourse of time]

that had arisen over the previous years; but the specifics he chose to cite from the potential long list of “accumulated evils” revealed this clear statist perspective. He was, first of all, concerned with militia leaders who “exceeded their authority” and refused to obey local Magistrates. Related to this, he criticized the way in which the control of military force in the case of militia had become a “badge of power” in local society. Finally, he noted the corruption of elite leaders who used militia for personal profit, and the broader but no less self-interested factional struggles that arose over the control of militia organizations.¹⁸

Tang’s main solution, outlined in new militia regulations, was more centralized, and unified, organization of militia at the county level tied to more direct official supervision by county magistrates. As a starting point, all previous militia bureaus were to be abolished. Confirming a centralizing initiative proposed earlier by Zhao Hengti, each county was to establish a general militia bureau (*tuanfang zongju* 團防總局) at the county seat to oversee all militia activity in the county. The most important change, though, was the county magistrate would now serve directly as the general bureau head (*zongjuzhang* 總局長). Each general bureau was also to have a vice head to aid the magistrate, nominated by the local community; but bureaucratic control was emphasized not only by the vice head’s position subordinate to the magistrate but also by an official appointment, on the magistrate’s recommendation, by the provincial government. Branch militia bureaus (*fenju* 分局) could also be established at the town or township level, if both requested by the people and agreed upon as necessary by the magistrate. The heads of these branch bureaus were again nominated by the local community, but they would receive their appointments from the magistrate, who also retained the power to

¹⁸ *Dagongbao*, 1926 July 22.

remove them.¹⁹

Tang's regulations dealt with militia in the form that had become dominant over the course of the warlord era—as standing forces of full-time militiamen. It did not call for the immediate disbandment of existing forces per se, but as a starting point renamed these forces, which often appeared under a variety of names (*qingxiangdui* 清鄉隊, *baoweidui* 保衛隊, etc.) with the unifying designation of *tuanfangdui* (團防隊).²⁰ While some flexibility would be allowed for troop numbers according to the needs of different areas, new regulations attempted to fit them into a uniform structure. County-level standing forces (under the *zongju*) could have twenty to two hundred men, while branch bureaus could have forces of ten to one hundred men. Each group of ten men would be organized into a squad (*ban* 班), with every thirty men formed into a platoon (*pai* 排) under a platoon commander (*paizhang* 排長). When there were two or more platoons, they were to be organized into corps (*dui* 隊) under a corps commander (*duizhang* 隊長). The magistrate would appoint all officers in these units in his role as general militia bureau head. Guarantors from the local elite were required for these appointments, but emphasis was placed on selecting men with military experience, rather than simply local elite status, to increase military professionalization.²¹

This professionalization, and bureaucratization, was also seen in the precise delineation of militia regulations in a number of areas. Going beyond very broad and often undefined training proscriptions of past regulations, there was a specific requirement of four hours of drill and two additional hours of other instruction per day. The new regulations purposely noted in no

¹⁹ “Xiuzheng (Hunan) gexian tuanfang tiaoli” [Revised (Hunan) county militia regulations], *Dagongbao*, 23 and 25 July 1926; “Gexian tuanfang zonggang” [General outline of county militia], *Dagongbao*, 3 August 1926.

²⁰ “Gexian tuanfang zonggang,” *Dagongbao*, 3 August 1926.

²¹ “Xiuzheng (Hunan) gexian tuanfang tiaoli,” *Dagongbao*, 23 July 1926.

uncertain terms that all militia forces must obey any order from their county's magistrate immediately, and send all prisoners back to the magistrate for trial. Interference in civil suits (a common abuse) was strictly forbidden. Weapons were to be carefully accounted for, with punishments meted out for any guns lost, sold, or lent out without authorization. Beyond their subordination to the magistrate, militia were also to consult with police in pursuing robbers, accept the commands of military forces engaged in bandit extermination campaigns, and respond to requests for aid from militia in neighboring areas.²² Procedures were also established to unify militia funding in each county, with strict budgets, to identify and gain official approval for all local revenue sources, and to insure proper accounting and prevent corruption through the establishment of supervisory committees drawn from the local community.²³

Although implementation of the militia reform program was uneven, there were some counties where militia reorganization seemed to come close to approximating the program's base goals. The evolution of militia in Xiangtan for example, had largely fit the critiques that underlay the call for reform. Militia leaders had become "authorities unto themselves" (*gezi weizheng*), with little mutual cooperation among different forces as gentry leaders used militia power to further their own interests. The establishment of a new general militia bureau in Xiangtan led to the election of a new general militia bureau vice head, Huang Liangyu, who was committed to unifying militia power in the county and had some success in gaining gentry cooperation.²⁴ It was not until December 1926, however, that a meeting—called by the general militia bureau,

²² "Xiuzheng (Hunan) gexian tuanfang tiaoli," *Dagongbao*, 23 July 1926.

²³ "Gexian tuanfang jingfei choubei fangfa" [Procedures for planning county militia expenses], *Dagongbao*, 2 August 1926. [dd150]

²⁴ Hunan sheng zhengfu mishu chu [Hunan Provincial Government Secretariat], ed., *Minguo shijiunian Hunan sheng zhengzhi nianjian* [The political yearbook of Hunan province: 1930] (Changsha: Hunan sheng zhengfu mishu chu, 1931), p. 481 [Cp41]; Zeng Jiwu, ed., *Hunan gexian diaocha biji* (Np., 1931), *zhengzhice*, p. 2; *Dagongbao*, 17 December 1926.

chaired by the magistrate and attended by eighty-five representatives of public organizations, branch militia bureau leaders, and sub-county administrative unit heads—implemented a comprehensive reorganization of all standing militia in the county. This meeting clearly asserted the authority of the county general militia bureau—with the magistrate as its head, and assisted by the vice head—over the organization, dispatch, and garrisoning of all militia forces in the county. The meeting’s main decision was to reorganize all existing militia into twelve sixty-man companies (*dui* 隊), divided among four new branch militia bureaus (*fenju* 分局). Officer and staff positions, and pay rates, were determined for militia companies as well as the general and branch bureaus. Militia funding was also unified for the entire county, relying mainly on a land tax add-on, with all revenues and outlays overseen by a militia fund manager nominated by the county’s public organizations.²⁵

While the very detailed plans for militia reorganization seen in the Xiangtan case show the potential for reform based on early statist regulations set down by the Tang regime,²⁶ implementation was much less complete in other counties. One crucial flaw in the bureaucratization of the militia under county general militia bureaus was the reliance on magistrates to hold the position of bureau head as a co-post on top of their many other duties. Although this gave the magistrate ultimate authority over all militia forces, not every magistrate in this period of considerable political upheaval had the time or energy to pay much attention to militia matters. In many cases, original militia leaders were simply assigned new titles as general bureau vice heads or branch bureau heads with very little change in their original militia

²⁵ *Dagongbao*, 17 December 1926.

²⁶ Although Tang Shengzhi remained the official governor (“chair” of the provincial executive committee), he left the province at the head of Northern Expeditionary forces in mid-August 1926, leaving the administration of the province in the hands of subordinates serving as acting governors.

organizations.²⁷ This not only allowed old abuses by corrupt militia leaders to continue, but also challenged revolutionary aspirations to eliminate the oppressive hand of “local bullies and evil gentry” from Chinese society.

In retrospect, the effort to transform established standing militia forces through a process of orderly reform was probably fated to fail from the start. Given their commitment to eliminate the power of “local bullies and evil gentry,” Nationalist (and Communist) party activists were predisposed to look view militia power-holders negatively in these terms. Under such suspicion, some militia leaders accepted the new situation and yielded their positions; others sought to make accommodations with the new revolutionary forces. Not surprisingly, however, many militia leaders were also pre-disposed to think ill of these new challengers and decided to resist. The months following the establishment of the Nationalist Party regime in Hunan were replete with incidents of militia attacks on party or peasant association headquarters or rallies, and the arrest and often execution of party activists.²⁸ These attacks highlighted the degree to which more was at stake than the problem of militia abuses. Militia in the wrong hands could also pose a political threat to the new regime.

Ultimately two alternate solutions were proposed or pursued to eliminate this threat, both of which would eschew the regime’s original orderly reform procedures. On one hand, revolutionary activists in many areas took matters into their own hands by the direct seizure of control over existing standing militia to oversee their transformation into forces more supportive of the revolution. On the other, hand, there were calls for more thorough reform that would

²⁷ [Can cite Mao on this, but also specific cases in CoCp notes.]

²⁸ An article reporting on the period up to late November 1926 cited incidents of militia interference with or attacks on peasant associations in Ningxiang, Yueyang, Jiamu, Guiyang, Zixing, and Xiangtan counties. Xiang Nong, “Hunan de nongmin yundong” [Hunan’s peasant movement], in *Xiangdao zhoubao* [The Guide], 6 January 1927, reprinted in *Hunan lishi ziliao* [Hunan history materials], (Changsha: Hunan renmin chubanshe, 1980) 1980: 1, p. 121.

simply eliminate all existing standing militia forces and replace them with more “popular” forms of mass militia. Both solutions were complicated, though, by tensions within the revolutionary movement over whether militia, in either standing or mass forms, should be based on community-wide or class foundations.

Community and Class in Militia Organization

Traditional forms of militia that emerged in China the nineteenth century, and continued to serve as precedents into the early Republican era, were explicitly envisioned as organizations representing and serving the entire community. Nonetheless, as Philip Kuhn pointed out in his study of nineteenth-century local militarization, “local defense inevitably brought out the contradiction between class divisions and community solidarity.” For militia proponents, community solidarity could not simply be assumed. Rather the key question was, “How was the community to be wielded into a self-defending unit when some of its inhabitants had virtually nothing to defend in the way of property and harbored more deep-seated hostility toward landlords and usurers of their own settlement than toward secret-society or bandit intruders?”²⁹ One attempt to emphasize cross-class cooperation in the provision of local self-defense was the common trope that noted that, “the rich provide funds; the poor provide their strength.”³⁰ Such expressions may have done little, though, to overcome impressions that the poor were being called upon to risk their lives to protect the property of the rich. Some nineteenth century regulations sought to address this problem by emphasizing, probably with mixed results, that

²⁹ Philip A. Kuhn, *Rebellion and Its Enemies in Late Imperial China: Militarization and Social Structure, 1796-1864* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), p. 60.

³⁰ *Xuxiu Ningxiang xianzhi* (1867), excerpted in Yang Yiqing, et al., eds., *Hunan difangzhizhong de Taiping Tianguo shiliao* [Historical materials on the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom in Hunan local gazetteers] (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 1983), p. 194; *Xiangxiang xianzhi* (1874), in Yang Yiqing, p. 304.

bandit depredations were indiscriminate in their effects on both rich and poor.³¹ Perhaps slightly more effective were rules that demanded that rich families not only provide funds but also offer their own sons and brothers for military service in militia on the same basis as the poor to show that all members of the community would share in the risks of self-defense.³²

From the perspective of the traditional state, a key means of promoting successful community-based local militia was reliance on gentry leadership. The calculations of the state in this regard were two-fold. First, the status of gentry within their home communities, supported by an ethic of community service, helped to legitimate and unify local support for militia organizations. Second, and equally important, to the extent that degree-holding literati derived their status from the state, based on educational achievement that reinforced state-supported values, gentry at the head of militia forces were expected to be able to both work with and remain loyal to the government. As a result, nineteenth century militia (*tuanlian* 團練) regulations were usually insistent that militia leadership be assumed by gentry who were morally upright and well respected members of local society.³³ The underlying assumption, though, was that gentry leadership would benefit the community as a whole not just the interest of its elite members.

This idealization of gentry leadership dedicated to community interests persisted in state approaches to militia organization despite conditions that often failed to live up to this model. First, gentry were not always the most capable, or more willing, candidates for militia leadership.

³¹ *Changsha xianzhi*, in Yang Yiqing, p. 119; *Huarong xianzhi* (1882), in Yang Yiqing, p. 497.

³² *Changsha xianzhi*, in Yang Yiqing, p. 121. Also see *Yongshun xianzhi* (1874), in Yang Yiqing, p. 608.

³³ See for example regulations in *Changsha xianzhi* [Changsha county gazetteer] (1871), excerpted in Yang Yiqing, p. 121; *Liuyang xianzhi* [Liuyang county gazetteer] (1873), in Yang Yiqing, p. 271; and *Yongshun xianzhi* [Yongshun county gazetteer] (1874), in Yang Yiqing, p. 608

In many cases, militia leadership was actually assumed by non-gentry landholders or men of wealth who saw an opportunity to acquire local elite status in their communities through successful militia organization.³⁴ Second, the nature of the Chinese gentry itself began to change in the early twentieth century as the end of the examination system reduced the gentry's dependence on, and loyalty to, the state, even as it also undermined the ability of the gentry to self-replicate. While the term "gentry" continued to be used as a reference for local elites, the actual distinction between bona fide gentry and actual local elites, whose power was based on more functionality and "patterns of dominance" rather degree-holding status, became increasingly blurred.³⁵ Finally, the growing importance of militia amid the turmoil of the early Republic increased the ability of militia leaders, whether gentry or non-gentry, to extend—and abuse—their power in local society, a power that was increasingly based on the command over standing militia forces composed of hired militiamen who were less integrated with local communities. One obvious result of these changes was greater overall skepticism about the value of gentry-led (or elite-led) militia.

The response of the statist reform program above to these changes was not to eliminate militia forces, or gentry leadership, but to bring them under greater state control and supervision. Even so, reformed standing militia were still envisioned as community-based rather than purely bureaucratic organizations; in other words they remained in the public realm. Reflecting this assumption, the reform included not just increased official control but a continued role for

³⁴ See Edward A. McCord, "Local Military Power and Elite Formation: The Liu Family of Xingyi County, Guizhou," Ch. 1 in Edward A. McCord, *Military Force and Elite Power in the Formation of Modern China* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014); and Xiaowei Zheng, "Loyalty, Anxiety and Opportunism: Local Elite Activism during the Taiping Rebellion in Zhejiang, 1851-1864," *Late Imperial China* 30.2 (December 2009).

³⁵ See Joseph W. Esherick and Mary Backus Rankin, eds., *Chinese Local Elites and Patterns of Dominance* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990).

community supervision and participation. This was primarily seen in procedures for community participation in leadership selection and budget oversight.

Interestingly, the fallback position for such participation still relied to a certain degree on the legitimating role of the gentry. Thus, Tang's militia reform regulations explicitly called the inclusion of "fair-minded gentry" (*gongzheng shenshi* 公正紳士) in the meetings organized by the magistrate to nominate the vice head and to determine militia budgets, and gentry guarantors were required for all militia officers.³⁶ In promoting the militia reform program, the Hunan Civil Administration Department (民政廳) also voiced the unspoken assumption of the regulations that the new vice heads chosen to work with magistrates in the unification of county militia should be "proper gentry" (正紳). Given the statist approach of the reform, it was no accident that the Department cited this as having the important effect of "uniting officials and gentry."³⁷ Meanwhile the Xiangtan county militia unification meeting was equally explicit in calling for "gentry" involvement in branch militia bureau nominations and gentry guarantors for militia force officers.³⁸

In both provincial and local cases, though, a subtle shift in understanding of community representation was reflected in the addition of a call for participation by the leaders of "public organizations" (*fatuan* or *gongfatuan* 公法團) in militia nomination meetings.³⁹ This was an important slippage away from status-based definitions of community leadership to a more inclusionary form of associational representation. In particular, this representation included the

³⁶ "Xiuzheng (Hunan) gexian tuanfang tiaoli," *Dagongbao*, 23 July 1926; "Gexian tuanfang jingfei choubai fangfa," *Dagongbao*, 2 August 1926.

³⁷ *Zhengzhi zhoubao* [The political weekly] 3 (27 August 1926), p. 8. [CP83]

³⁸ *Dagongbao*, 17 December 1926.

³⁹ "Xiuzheng (Hunan) gexian tuanfang tiaoli," *Dagongbao*, 23 July 1926; "Gexian tuanfang jingfei choubai fangfa," *Dagongbao*, 2 August 1926; *Dagongbao*, 17 December 1926.

organizational building blocks of the new revolutionary regime, including party branches and new “mass” organizations such as peasant associations, worker unions, and women’s associations. This mechanism validated the inclusion of class interests, even if the ruling paradigm still counted on gentry leadership as a binding community force.

The corporatist inclinations of the emerging Nationalist state clearly recognized class differences, and was dedicated liberating the masses from elite oppression as part of their commitment to Sun Yat-sen’s People’s Livelihood principle. In confronting the issue of militia organizing, this translated as an obligation to end the reign of “local bullies and evil gentry” who used militia forces to oppress and abuse the common people. To this end, the Nationalist Party’s Peasant Section (*nongminbu* 農民部) reported to a provincial party meeting in August 1926 about the need both to deal with the continuing tyranny of militia bureaus with local bully/evil gentry connections and to plan for peasant self defense organizations.⁴⁰ The ultimate tendency within Nationalist Party, however, was seek to ameliorate rather than exacerbate class conflict. On one hand this means dealing with abusive militia leaders as individuals rather than as representatives of dominant classes; on the other hand this also favored approaches to militia organization, as a “people’s self-defense force,” that emphasized community unity over class conflict. This vision of community-based militia organizations would not, however, go uncontested.

Communist Party members and their leftist allies within the Nationalist-Communist United Front coalition, however, drew a different conclusion from the problem of the domination of local militia by “local bullies and evil gentry.” The left embraced rather than eschewed traditional class tensions within local militia to support a class-based critique of militia

⁴⁰ *Dagongbao*, 22 August 1926. [dd153]

organization. This revolutionary critique had been emerging even before the beginning of the National Revolution. One example can be found an article published in a Communist Party organ in 1925 that addressed the interest in some quarters about the possibility of using local militia as a revolutionary military force to counter reactionary warlord armies. The author of this piece acknowledged the “superficial” notion that militia could serve as a “people’s force” uniting landlords and peasants in a common defense against marauding warlords and bandits. The article argued, however, that in the end landlords who held real power in rural areas would only allow the militia to serve their own interests. Thus, the author argued, existing militia could not act as a revolutionary force but would have to be remade to serve the specific interests of the peasants.⁴¹

As worked out within the National Revolution in Hunan, this meant that just as previous militia ultimately were controlled by and served the interests of landlords and other local elites, revolutionary militia in the countryside would have to become explicitly “peasant,” or “worker,” self-defense forces. Thus an October 1926 proclamation by a provincial-level Communist party meeting in Hunan strongly argued for the self-defense rights of workers and peasants. The solution proposed in this resolution still retained a community emphasis by called for the reorganization of existing militia into “county defense armies.”⁴² In practice, though, political activists on the left sought to implement this call for the self-defense rights of workers and peasants explicitly named worker pickets (*jiuchadui* 糾察隊) and peasant self-defense armies (*nongmin ziwei dui* 農民自衛隊) under the direct authority of peasant and worker associations. By this means, local military force was not only organized along class lines but also clearly meant to serve class interests.

⁴¹ *Zhongguo qingnian* [Chinese youth] (February 8, 1925). [P499]

⁴² *Hunan lishi ziliao*, 1980: 1, p. 67-72. [H189-190]

This movement toward the organization of militia along class line did not happen in isolation. Under Communist influence the nature of the National Revolution in Hunan was increasingly interpreted in terms of class struggle. There had been a fairly strong consensus among Communists and Nationalists about the need to eliminate the power of “local bullies and evil gentry” from Hunan society. For the Nationalists, however, this was an issue of attacking specific individuals who abused their power—with the ultimate goal of preventing broader class struggle. For the Communists, though, there could be no social revolution without class struggle. As their insistence on class struggle increased, a new universalizing definition of “local bullies and evil gentry” emerged: *youtu jiehao, wushen bulie* (有土無紳不烈) or “all with land are bullies; all gentry are evil.”

In his famous “Report on the Peasant Movement in Hunan,” published in the middle of the National Revolution, Mao Zedong challenged those who saw this expression as “going too far” by defending all attacks carried out by peasants against local elites under this slogan and reminding his readers that a revolution is “an act of violence whereby one class overthrows the power of another.”⁴³ In the pursuit of this end, Mao called for the seizure of the arms of old armed forces to create an “armed force of the peasantry,” as well as the broader establishment of a non-professional militia of all peasants through the organization of “spear corps.”⁴⁴ Clearly, battle lines were being drawn over the class-based transformation of local military forces, including both standing militia and new forms of mass militia.

Political Takeover of Militia Forces

The militia reform program announced immediately after the fall of Hunan to National

⁴³ [Zedong, *Mao Zedong xuanji* (Selected works of Mao Zedong) (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1951), 1: xxx [English version pp. 26-27]

⁴⁴ Mao Zedong, *Mao Zedong xuanji*, 1:xxx [English version pp. 42]

Revolutionary Army forces was justified in part by the need to eliminate militia as a source of power for local bullies and evil gentry. Simply calling for the reorganization of militia, with new supervisory powers provided to the county magistrate, did not however necessarily guarantee this result, particularly in a process that still involved local elites in the selection of militia bureau staff and militia force officers. Many local militia commanders had originally come to their positions with the support of county magistrates and local elites, and many of these same magistrates and local elites were not themselves convinced of the need for social revolution. In some cases, then, the “reorganization” of militia simply meant a renaming of existing forces, leaving many of the same militia leaders in command. Even if the unification of militia called for in the reform program was carried out with some change in leadership (as in the Xiangtan case cited above), this did not necessarily mean a change in the class character of the militia.

As revolutionary activists spread out across the province to organize mass movements, then, they often found militia leaders who not only opposed the change in the structure of local power represented by the establishment of peasant, worker, and other mass associations but were also willing to use the military force in their hands to suppress them. If the revolutionary enterprise was to succeed, these activists needed to find some way to insure not just a superficial reorganization of militia forces but also a political takeover that would support the new power of mass organizations. To the extent that many of these activists, many of whom were Communist party members, interpreted the goals of the National Revolution in class terms, the specific objective of this political takeover became transformation of local militia into the military arm of peasant and workers classes. In doing so, however, they often thwarted the statist approach of the original provincially ordered militia reforms by seeking to place militia directly under the control of newly organized worker or peasant organizations. Although Nationalist Party support

for the peasant and worker movements provided some justification for this development, many within the Party began to see the end result as inimical to broader Party goals of national unity. In this context, the political takeovers of militia by political activists became an important facet of a deeper struggle that would eventually tear the Communist-Nationalist United Front apart.

The memoirs of many of the activists involved in organizing mass movements in Hunan's counties during the National Revolution clearly show that they took on their tasks with a clear appreciation for the need for armed power to secure and defend the fruits of the revolution. Thus one of the activists elected to the Qiyang County Nationalist Party committee in August 1926, Lei Jingqian, is noted as stressing the principle he learned while studying under Mao Zedong at the Peasant Institute in Canton prior to the Northern Expedition—that revolution needs armed power.⁴⁵ One of Mao's companions on his investigatory tour of Hunan in January 1927 remembered Mao conveyed the same message about the need to establish worker and peasant military power to the activists in the counties they visited.⁴⁶ Mao was not the only person promoting such views; by early 1927 the organization of class-based self-defense forces was an accepted principle within Hunan mass movements. Thus in an early January 1926 provincial wide peasant-worker meeting, with over three hundred delegates representing thirty-three counties, called for the overthrow of local bullies and evil gentry, the dissolution of all old militia (*tuanfang*), and the establishment of peasant-worker armed forces.⁴⁷ In other words, there

⁴⁵ Bo Xilu, "Qiyang geming fengbao" [Qiyang's revolutionary storm], manuscript no. 78-324, Hunan zhengzhi xieshang huiyi, wenshiban (Historical materials office, Hunan political consultative conference), p. 16.

⁴⁶ Chen Xinxian, "Ji 1927 nian Mao Zedong tongzhi sanci hui-Xiang" [Remembering comrade Mao Zedong's three visits to Hunan in 1927], *Hunan wenshi ziliao xuanji* [Hunan historical materials selections] 16 (1982), p. 7.

⁴⁷ "Changde xian jin-xiandaishi dashi jishi, 1898-1949" [Record of great events in the modern and contemporary history of Changde County], *Changde xian wenshi ziliao* [Changde County historical materials] 5 (1988), p. 162; Hengyang xian nongmin yundong diaocha

was no lack of attention to the need to establish revolutionary military power by social revolution activists; indeed the establishment of such power was recognized as an important and necessary goal. At the same time, the traditional concept of community-based militia was clearly rejected in favor of local military forces that would be explicitly identified with the workers and peasants whose interests they were meant to protect.

Just as the spread of the revolution in Hunan was an uneven process, so the revolutionary takeover of militia forces occurred in different places at different times. The thoroughness of the takeover also depended on different conditions in each locale—the relative strength of mass movements compared to established power-holders being the most obvious factor. Nonetheless the general support of the new revolutionary regime in Changsha, both party and government, for the establishment of mass organizations and for the transformation of local militia was often a crucial factor influencing local transitions. Thus, local party activists did not hesitate to seek official orders, and when necessary military support, to tip the balance of power in local politics and government in their favor.

One example of how regime change affected the outcomes of local political struggle can be seen in the failure of a counterrevolutionary coup in Rucheng County in early December 1926. In this case a group of conspirators led by the former head of the Chamber of Commerce, He Jinqing, and including the heads of the “household conscription militia” (*aihutuan*), the county militia bureau (*tuanfangju*), and merchant militia (*baoshangdui* 保商隊), used the armed forces at their disposal to seal the county capital, surround party and mass organization headquarters, arrested the secretary of the Communist Party, Zhu Qingyun. Communist Party activists quickly

bangongshi [Hengyang County peasant movement investigation office], “Dageming shiqi Hengyang nongmin yundong shilue” [Sketch history of the Hengyang peasant movement in the great revolution period], *Hengyang wenshi ziliao* [Hengyang historical materials] 1 (1983), p. 60.

organized a peasant-armed force to offer some resistance and appealed to the county magistrate to protect Zhu Qingyun. But they also reported the situation to provincial authorities and requested military assistance to suppress the coup. The provincial response was unequivocal. The magistrate was ordered to free Zhu and to cooperate with party leaders to suppress the coup. A company of troops was sent to back these orders, surrounding the conspirators' headquarters to force their surrender. He Jinqing was arrested and executed, and the other conspirators fled the county.⁴⁸ This incident proved that previous patterns of elite dominance could no longer be sustained. But it no doubt also reinforced revolutionary activist concerns about the potential danger of unreconstructed, elite-led militia.

In the early stages of the revolution there were at least some revolutionary activists who found it easier to make accommodations with local power holders, to the extent that such an accommodation was possible. The activist sent to manage organization of the peasant movement in Jianghua County, Wu Jianren, noted that the training he received at Changsha before setting out on his assignment clearly called for a change in militia personnel—that existing “landlord” armed power could simply not substitute for peasant armed power. When he arrived in Jianghua, though, he was given a warm welcome by the old-style “gentleman” who headed the county militia bureau and who eagerly agreed to support the revolution. In the end, then, Wu joined the head of the local party branch in deciding that while they could not give the old gentleman an official peasant association post recognizing his authority over the county's militia, they would allow him to remain in his position until someone better could be found to replace him. This would be a decision that Wu, in retrospect, would acknowledge to have been a mistake.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Ouyang Si, “Rucheng dageming yundong de huiyi” [Remembrance of Rucheng's great revolution movement], *Rucheng wenshi ziliao* [Rucheng historical materials] 2 (1986), pp. 2-3.

⁴⁹ Wu Jianren, “Yi jiu er qi nian canyu Jianghua nongmin yundong shimo” [The

To the extent that many of the activists were themselves drawn from the local elite, they were often able to use their own connections to manipulate outcomes better suited to their revolutionary objectives. One example of this occurred in Ningxiang where a Communist Party member specifically sent to the county to engineer a militia takeover hatched a complicated scheme with the head of the peasant association executive committee to put forward an acceptable member of the local gentry as the public face for their actions. Their target for this maneuver was Wen Jingxi, a *linsheng* (廩生) who had also studied in Japan where he had joined the Sun Yat-sen's Revolutionary Alliance. Besides his long revolutionary sympathies Wen had two special qualities. First, nearly one-half of Ningxiang's militia branch bureau heads considered Wen their teachers, from a time when he served as principal of a Ningxiang academy. Second, he was the uncle of the Ningxiang Communist Party branch head. With Wen a willing accomplice, the local Nationalist Party branch engineered his appointment by Tang Shengzhi as head of the Ningxiang county militia bureau. Having obtained this position, Wen called a meeting of branch militia bureau heads where he proposed that their forces be turned over for reorganization as a peasant self-defense corps. When Yang Zhize, a militia commander who had previously attempted to suppress the peasant movement in his garrison area, objected to this proposal he was arrested by Wen's armed guard. This scared other potential opponents into abandoning their posts, opening the way for the direct seizure and reorganization of their forces.⁵⁰

In many locations, the organization of peasant associations, with their large membership,

beginning and end of my participation in the Jianghua peasant movement in 1927], manuscript no. 81-399, Hunan zhengzhi xieshang huiyi, wenshiban (Historical materials office, Hunan political consultative conference).

⁵⁰ Jiang Yuzhou, "Ningxiang gongnong wuzhuang de lai long qu mai" [The origin and development of Ningxiang's worker-peasant armed forces], *Changsha wenshi ziliao* [Changsha historical materials] 8 (1989), p. 31.

provided a coercive resource to implement militia takeovers. Thus, in Changsha, the provincial capital, provincial party and peasant association leaders took advantage of a mass victory parade celebrating the capture, by Northern Expeditionary forces, of Hanyang and Hankou (the main industrial and commercial cities across the Yangzi River from the Hubei provincial capital of Wuchang) to force the county militia bureau to give up its arms. This emboldened peasant association activist in other locales in the county to do the same. In Mingdaozen, the local peasant association used the same time of parade to rush the unsuspecting local militia bureau, seizing their guns and forcing the flight of the militiamen. In Xinkangzhen, a mass of several thousand-peasant association members simply surrounded the local bureau, again forcing them to give up their thirty guns. Facing similar pressure, some militia willingly dispersed or accepted new leadership dispatched by the party to take control of the militia bureau.⁵¹

Another common technique in dealing with particularly powerful militia leaders who either opposed the development of mass movements openly or who were seen as politically unreliable was to file political or legal charges calling for their arrest, removal, and even execution. Thus, when arrest alone did not halt Yang Zhize's opposition to the takeover his militia in Ningxiang, the county peasant association and other public groups filed charges against Yang for acting like a local overlord, leading to his execution.⁵² In Ling County, revolutionary activists were also confronted with two "evil gentry" militia leaders, Jia Shaodi and Sun Bingwen, who had refused to turn over their guns to the county peasant association. In a meeting led by Zhu Zihe, a Canton Peasant Institute-trained, Nationalist-Communist activist sent by the province to help manage this issue, a decision was made to use "peaceful" political means

⁵¹ "Dageming shiqi nongmin yundong zai Changsha" [The peasant movement in Changsha during the great revolution], *Changsha xian wenshi ziliao* [Changsha county historical materials], 2 (1985), pp. 10-11.

⁵² Jiang Yuzhou, pp. 30-31.

to resolve this problem instead of force. This political process, however, actually involved organizing mass organizations, led by the student association, to charge Jia and Sun with ten major crimes—including obstruction of the peasant movement, using militia to make themselves local “kings” refusing to turn over their arms, and opposing the revolution. Not surprisingly, the two men rejected these charges and led their forces into the mountains to continue their resistance. At this point Zhu had to turn to “force,” leading a quickly raised peasant self-defense army in an attempt, ultimately unsuccessful, to track down and destroy Jia and Sun’s forces.⁵³

Zhu’s assumption of the leadership of Ling County’s peasant self-defense force was also a common strategy to insure the proper political control of reorganized militia forces. In Qiyang County, a core group of activists, including Communist Party members Lei Jinqian (a Peasant Institute graduate) and He Zhennan, played key roles in the revolutionary takeover of the county. Both men first served on the county’s peasant association planning committee, and then after it was established held the positions of chair and vice chair. They were also elected to the executive committee of the county Nationalist Party branch. Lei also took the lead in efforts to seize control of militia forces, proposing in particular the reorganization of the county militia bureau (*tuanfangju*) into a self-defense militia, with the explicit purpose of using its two hundred guns to establish peasant military power. After Lei guided this proposal through approvals by the county party branch, the county government, and a meeting of public organizations, Lei and He were appointed to co-posts as the head and vice-head of the reformed militia organization.⁵⁴

In significant ways, the direct assumption of top militia positions by peasant association

⁵³ Zou Yingwei, “Canjia dageming he shang Jinggangshan da fandongpai de huiyi” [Memoir of participation in the great revolution and going to Jinggangshan to attack reactionaries], manuscript no. 2867, Hunan zhengzhi xieshang huiyi, wenshiban, pp. 22-43. Also see a shortened version of this memoir in: Zou Yingwei, “Mari shibian zai Lingxian” [The Mari Incident in Ling County], *Zhuzhou wenshi* [Zhuzhou history] 11 (1988), pp. 201-203.

⁵⁴ Bo Xilu, pp. 13-17.

leaders such as Lei Jinqian and He Zhennan mirrors the appointment of magistrates to co-posts at the head of county militia bureaus under the statist reform program. The goal in each case was to locate where ultimate political authority should be centered—as well as to provide the military force needed to assert that authority. While the provincial government had started with the assumption that militia would be community organizations subordinate to the state (in the person of the magistrate), revolutionary takeovers of militia forces on the ground pointed in a different direction: a militia not only dedicated to specific class interests, but used to shift the focus of real power over local government to mass organizations, or more precisely in most cases to peasant associations. Ultimately these two approaches to militia organization, and local governance, were irreconcilable. The role of the Communist Party in promoting (and to a large degree controlling) the rising power of peasant associations also exacerbated tensions with the Nationalist Party that could not simply be papered over by the United Front consensus in support of the development of mass movements.

Underneath this political tension though was a very real struggle for the control of military power in local society. Both Communists and Nationalists were united in seeing the potential political threat posed by armed militia in the hands of counterrevolutionary elites. The goal in the revolutionary takeover of these forces was to change them from threats to assets; tension only occurred over whom ultimately would control these assets. The political potential of militia was not, however, limited to just those forces that existed at the time of the Northern Expedition. In most cases revolutionary activists felt the success of the revolution in local society depended not just on the revolutionary transformation of existing forces (the success of which was never a foregone conclusion) but in the expansion of these forces under revolutionary leadership. Resource constraints, however, limited the extent to which additional standing

militia (armed with guns) could be added. From the beginning then there was interest in expanding military power through other forms of militia, particularly in the form of non-professional, part-time mass militia. Not surprisingly though the organization of mass militia involved some of the same basic tensions seen into the struggle for control of standing forces.

Organizing Mass Militia: Household Conscription Militia and Worker-Peasant Self-Defense Forces

The frequent conflicts that emerged between militia forces and peasant associations, even after orders for militia reform had been issued, raised questions as to whether they were actually salvageable in any useful form.⁵⁵ Thus, although Tang Shengzhi's regime had begun with a decision to reform local militia systems, by December 1926, it was reported that in the wake of yet another local conflict over the control of militia arms (this time in Xiangxiang County) the provincial government was in the process of deciding whether militia (*tuanfang*) should even be continued.⁵⁶ The problem, of course, was that the conditions of the times seemed to call for more rather than fewer local self-defense forces, not only to protect communities from continuing threats from bandits and unruly soldiers but also to provide the force needed to enforce the will of the new revolutionary regime over the counties. This second goal would fail, though, unless the political unreliability of existing militia forces could be fixed.

One response to this situation was the heightened determination of some revolutionary activists to continue to do whatever was necessary to seize control of local standing militia and to

⁵⁵ An article in the *Xiangtan gongbao* [Xiangtan news] (4 November 1926) concluded that given persisting problems with militia bureaus (*tuanfangju*) controlled by local bullies and evil gentry, the only way to move the revolution forward was to abolish them all. Excerpted in *Zhuzhou wenshi* [Zhuzhou history] 3 (1983), p. 48-49.

⁵⁶ *Hunan sheng zhengfu gongbao*, 1926: 18 (19 December), p. 23. In this case the county magistrate was seeking permission to suppress a group of "ruffians" acting under the name of a rural assembly preparatory office who had forcibly seized militia arms in one town. [GB26-27]

transform, and expand, them to better serve revolutionary purposes. Another alternative solution, though, was to concentrate instead on building a new foundation for local self-defense in the form of mass militia. In some ways, this solution was a fallback to traditional preferences for mass militia over standing forces, for many of the same reasons. First, the non-professional character of mass militia reduced their potential to threaten the state's own monopoly over military force. Second, mass militia provided a weaker base for manipulation for local power interests. Third, mass militia was less of a burden on local budgets, since the service of militiamen in essence took the form of labor corvée labor. At the same time, the idea of mass militia had a clear appeal in the new revolutionary era as a force that was inherently grounded on popular foundations. This was sufficient to build some consensus of the value of mass militia, even if some dispute still remained as to whether these “popular” foundations should be established on the basis of community or class. The result was both a series of proposals in favor of the organization of mass militia and efforts on the ground to turn these proposals into reality.

One important manifestation of this interest in mass militia occurred during a discussion on village self defense at the Hunan provincial peasants representative meeting held in Changsha in December 1926. The result of this meeting was a resolution calling for the replacement of all existing militia organizations (*tuanfangbu* 團防部, or *baoweituan* 保衛團) with a new system of “household conscription militia” (*aihutuan* 挨戶團). This resolution started out with the proposition that existing militia (*tuanfang*) were essentially local bully/evil gentry forces, many of whom participated in attacks on mass movement even while failing to provide any real defense for local communities. The solution offered was to replace existing *tuanfang* forces with “household conscription” organizations, which could serve as “true” people's self-defense

forces.⁵⁷

As a form of militia, *aihutuan* was little more than a replication of nineteenth century *tuanlian* (團練). *Tuanlian* systems, in their ideal form, called for the recruitment of one or more adult males from each family within a specific area as a militiaman (*tuanding* 團丁), who would receive some basic military training so they could be gathered as needed to respond to threats to local security. There was one major difference, though, between previous *tuanlian* and the *aihutuan* proposal by the peasants representatives meeting. Whereas *tuanlian* were explicitly envisioned as community organizations held together by gentry leadership, the new *aihutuan* proposal, not surprisingly, was linked to a broader restructuring of local government representing and empowering the peasant class.

In another resolution dealing directly with the reorganization of local government, previous sub-county administrative units were condemned as feudal tools of the landlord class, which “used militia (*tuanfang*) to oppress the good and the weak.” As a first step in destroying this old feudal order, new popular elections were to be held to select new local leaders—with the caveat that gentry participation would be excluded. Next, local peasant associations would lead other “revolutionary peoples organizations” to organization village self-government preparation organs. This would then lead to the establishment of rural assemblies (*xiangmin huiyi* 鄉民會議) to serve as highest governing body at the village level. These rural assemblies would in turn elect local self-governing committees (*zizhi weiyuanhui* 自治委員會) to take control of actual local sub-county administration.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ [Peasant Repr Meeting: dd162]; “Xiangcun ziwei wenti jueyi’an” [Village self-defense question resolution], *Hunan lishi ziliao* [Hunan history materials] 1980: 2, pp. 14-16.

⁵⁸ “Xiangcun zizhi wenti jueyi’an” [Village self-government questions resolution], *Hunan lishi ziliao*, 1980: 2, p. 13-14.

The proposal for the establishment of *aihutuan* called for this mass militia to be subsumed under this new class-based governing structure, starting with the formation of individual *aihutuan* under the command and supervision of local self-governing committees. These *aihutuan* would inherit previous *tuanfang* budgets, as well as all weapons, uniforms and equipment of previous militia forces. Although previous standing forces were to be disbanded, new *aihutuan* organizations would be allowed to recruit standing units if there was a need for such forces. The political reliability of all *aihutuan* forces was also to be increased by providing not only military training but also specific political instruction. At the county level, a new *aihutuan* general bureau would also replace original county general militia bureau (*tuanfang zongju* 團防總局). Significantly this resolution no longer held a place for the county magistrate as head of this general bureau but called for the appointment of a general bureau head nominated by rural councils.⁵⁹ In other words, the previous statist top-down approach to militia reform, this proposal advocated a democratic process from the bottom up.

Soon after this resolution was issued, the issue of the possible formation of *aihutuan*, or household conscription militia, also arose in the Hunan Provincial Assembly. This discussion responded to a request from a party branch in Yueyang seeking permission to allow peasants who had seized “enemy” guns to form a peasant self-defense militia (*nongmin ziweituan* 農民自衛團). This led the Assembly chair to question whether original militia would also continue to exist if such peasant forces were allowed to organize. Responding to this inquiry, the head of the provincial Civil Administration Department, Feng Tianzhu, reported that given the persistence of banditry in many areas, it would be inappropriate to eliminate local militia abruptly; but the only good way to deal with problems with these forces would be to organize household conscription

⁵⁹ “Xiangcun ziwei wenti jueyi’an” [Village self-defense question resolution], *Hunan lishi ziliao* [Hunan history materials] 1980: 2, pp. 14-16.

militia (*aihutuan*). He argued that this type of mass militia would not only be able to clear out bandits, but would also be economical since *aihutuan* militiamen were normally unpaid.

Avoiding the question of whether a peasant militia should be permitted in this specific case, Feng noted that if an *aihutuan* system were carried out, peasants would naturally be included, making it essentially the same in nature as a “peasant self-defense militia.”⁶⁰

This response clearly reflected an emerging discourse about using mass militia both to resolve problems with standing militia and as a better means of providing for local self-defense. Feng Tianzhu was artfully ambiguous, though, about the relationship of peasant mass militia that were beginning to emerge in this period to this more idealized form of mass militia. One on hand, his statement might be taken to justify peasant self-defense militia as just another form of *aihutuan*. On the other hand, it could equally be interpreted as saying the creation of *aihutuan* could make the formation of specific peasant militia unnecessary. The key issue, then, was not the nature of *aihutuan*, a known entity with long historical precedents, but the character of newer peasant self-defense forces. The Assembly chair turned to this central question by focusing on the issue of control. Taking a very traditional stance, he noted that the government has been able to control militia in the past because *the gentry wielded tuanlian power*. Who, he asked, would take responsibility to train and control peasant self-defense militia? With this statement he showed that he clearly recognized how the class basis of these new forces made them very different from the *tuanlian* of the past. Not quite ready to take responsibility to permit autonomous militia organizing by “uncontrolled” peasants, the Assembly ultimately decided that

⁶⁰ *Hunan sheng zhengfu gongbao*, 1927: 20 (2 January), pp. 16-17. In this discussion, existing militia were referred to with the older term *tuanlian*. Original *tuanlian* from the nineteenth century were also primarily household conscription systems, but the term confusingly was also applied to full-time standing local self-defense forces created in the same period (which in the Republican period were actually more often identified by the term *tuanfang*). The use of the term *tuanlian* in this discussion was clearly meant to refer to these standing *tuanfang* forces.

the issue of peasant militia should wait for fuller discussion--and the issuance of unified official regulations by the government for mass militia. In the meantime, the Yueyang peasants were ordered to turn their guns over to the county magistrate for safekeeping.⁶¹

Although the Provincial Assembly discussion in this case seemed inconclusive, the consensus within the provincial government as a whole seemed to be building toward the reconstruction of militia on a household conscription basis. Thus, even as the Provincial Assembly made its decision, Governor Tang Shengzhi issued a series of proposals to party branch representatives that although conceding that the reform of original *tuanfang* forces should continue as a transitional measure but urged counties to proceed with the organization of *aihutuan* as the main foundation for local self-defense.⁶² This was confirmed shortly after with new sub-county self-government regulations that again called for the establishment of household conscription militia (*aihutuan*) to provide for local self-defense.⁶³

Although the advocacy of mass militia by the government at this point in time may have stimulated some local efforts to implement *aihutuan* systems, the main effect was probably simply to legitimate the organization of mass militia that was already underway in many counties. Significantly though, most of these mass militia eschewed the term *aihutuan*, with its traditional associations including the identification of the family as its basic organization unit, for designations that clearly identified mass militia as class-based organizations. Thus the most salient feature of the mass militia raised in this period was probably their attachment to mass organizations, with the largest numbers affiliated with peasant associations but some also organized under worker associations. Although community versus class-based alternatives may

⁶¹ *Hunan sheng zhengfu gongbao*, 1927: 20 (2 January), p. 17.

⁶² *Hunan sheng zhengfu gongbao*, 1927: 20 (2 January), pp. 41.

⁶³ *Dagongbao*, 20 February 1927.

have still been debated on theoretical levels, in practice mass militia were being organized on the basis of class identities and serving specific class interests

As noted above, in his investigation into the Hunan peasant movement (which occurred in the same period as the Provincial Assembly discussion), Mao Zedong had praised both the takeover of existing militia forces but also promoted the expansion of worker and peasant based “spear” corps (*suobiaodui* 梭標隊). Calling for every peasant to be armed with a spear, he praised those locales where much progress to the end had already been achieved. He noted that in Xiangxiang county alone, 100,000 spears had been produced to arm “irregular household militia,”⁶⁴ while the counties of Xiangtan, Hengshan, Liling and Changsha had 30,000 to 80,000 spears each.⁶⁵ Verification of specific numbers is hard to come by, but a variety of sources suggest that mass militia organized not just in these counties but in others often reached similar numbers.⁶⁶ In some locations artisans were kept busy meeting the growing demand for spears by worker and peasant organizations.⁶⁷ One account related a song remembered from this period that included the verse: “beat iron in the morning, beat iron at night: beat out spears to give to the peasant association.”⁶⁸

The substantial numbers of the new militia forces found in many locales was clearly connected to their affiliation with peasant associations, with their mass memberships. Thus as

⁶⁴ [Cheek p. 60 translation uses this, but not in official translation. Check Chinese original to see if use *aihutuan* term]

⁶⁵ Mao Zedong, *Mao Zedong xuanji*, 1:xxx; [English version p. 42].

⁶⁶ Ningxiang, for example, was reported to have eventually produced 60,000 men in worker pickets and peasant self-defense corps, mainly armed with spears but including six hundred guns. Jiang Yuzhou, p. 29.

⁶⁷ Zhou Guangcui, “Hanshou xian gongnong ziweijun shilue” [A sketch history of the Hanshou worker-peasant self-defense army], *Hanshou wenshi ziliao* [Hanshou historical materials] 3 (n.d.), p. 22.

⁶⁸ “1926-1927 nian de Chaling nongmin yundong” [The peasant movement in Chaling, 1926-1927], *Chaling wenshi ziliao* [Chaling historical materials] 3 (1988), p. 57.

soon as it became possible to organize peasant associations openly in Changsha county, following the arrival of National Revolutionary forces, these associations also began to establish armed forces in the form of armed “picket corps” (*jiuchalian* 糾察連) organized in each township, and armed with spears. The mass nature of these forces was insured by including every young man in peasant association families in one of these picket corps. By early 1927 these individual corps were unified into a larger “peasant self-defense militia” (*nongmin ziweituan* 農民自衛團).⁶⁹ The establishment of worker associations in urban areas was also accompanied by the formation of worker pickets (*gongren jiuchadui* 工人糾察隊). Because workers were a smaller percentage of the population, these forces were usually smaller than their peasant association counterparts. Thus in Hanshou County there were a total of three hundred worker pickets, organized by trade, versus over two thousand in the peasant self-defense corps.⁷⁰ Even so, Hengyang, a county with a larger worker population eventually fielded between three and four thousand worker pickets.⁷¹

Although many start-up mass militia organized in this period were often identified as “spear corps” after their most obvious form of weaponry (though other locally available weapons such as knives and swords, or bird guns, were also deployed), because of their affiliation with specific mass organizations they were increasingly identified more regularly by class-specific terminology: worker pickets (*jiuchadui* 糾察隊) and peasant self-defense corps (*nongmin ziwei dui* 農民自衛隊). The organization of these mass militia forces quickly began to play a role in

⁶⁹ “Ye Kui lingdaode nongmin wuzhuang” [The peasant armed force led by Ye Kui], *Wangcheng wenshi* [Wangcheng history] 1 (1985), p. 13.

⁷⁰ “Dageming shiqi Hanshou xian gongnong geming yundong” [Hanshou county worker-peasant revolutionary movement in great revolution], *Hanshou wenshi ziliao* [Hanshou historical materials] 1 (1985), p. 14.

⁷¹ Zhou Zibing, et al., “‘Mari shibian’ qianhou zai Hengyang” [Hengyang before and after Mari], *Hengyang wenshi ziliao* [Hengyang historical materials] 1 (1983), p. 77.

expanding the power of peasant associations. In some cases they defended association meetings from attacks; in other cases they were used to round up and hold local bullies and evil gentry accused of counterrevolutionary crimes. But they could also be deployed for a variety of other community as well as revolutionary purposes. Thus the members of one local peasant self-defense force in Chaling County not only gathered periodically for military training, and meted out punishments to local bullies and evil gentry, but also played music spreading revolutionary propaganda, led tax protests, and organized the local people to repair bridges and roads.⁷²

When of a sufficient size, these forces were also able to aid in the takeover of standing militia forces. For example, revolutionary activists in Changning County created a strategy using worker and peasant spear corps for the “peaceful” seizure of arms from the county militia bureau. This did this by inviting the militia to a welcome celebration at the county peasant association. When over one hundred armed militiamen arrived to participate in this event, they were placed behind a line of worker pickets and in front of a larger mass of peasant association members, with the peasant spear corps deployed at their front. In the middle of the event, the surrounded militiamen were ordered to surrender their guns.⁷³

The arming of class-based militia with spears was driven by necessity—the scarcity of firearms outside of some privately held bird guns, or other non-standard guns. As such it was not meant to be a permanent condition if firearms could be acquired. The self-defense force set up by the peasant association of Cili County started with only twenty men armed with spears or swords. One Communist activist then used his classmate connections with the head of the Cili County police to free up forty to fifty guns by weeding out “bad elements” in the local “police

⁷² “1926-1927 nian de Chaling nongmin yundong,” p. 57.

⁷³ Li Jungbi, “Wo zai dageming shiqi yiduan jingli de huiyi” [A memoir of one part of my experience in the great revolution], *Changning wenshi ziliao* [Changning historical materials] 3 (1987), pp. 38.

guard corps” (*jingbeidui* 警備隊), which were then turned over to the peasant self-defense force and to create worker pickets. Shortly after, the head of the executive committee of the county’s peasant association used his authority to absorb two hundred armed men from a merchant militia into this self-defense army. This became the core of an even more expanded peasant self-defense “army” (*nongmin ziwei jun* 農民自衛軍), which was placed under the control of a Communist Party member sent to the county specifically to take control of such forces in the name of the local peasant association.⁷⁴ One significant changes that occurred during this process, and as seen in this case, was the relabeling of peasant mass militia from peasant self-defense “corps” (*dui*) to peasant self-defense “armies” (*jun*). In practice the two terms were often used interchangeably—even more so in the memoirs of participants from this era. But one source does note how the designation “army” was often began to be attached to the names of self-defense and/or spear forces after the addition of firearms obtained through the seizure of *tuanfang* weapons.⁷⁵

The arms seized from standing militia by peasant self-defense forces or worker pickets were, therefore, therefore purposefully absorbed into these forces to make them even more powerful. But the differential between those armed with firearms and those without was usually quite large. In Ningxiang, for example, a six-hundred-man self-defense company served as the core for a larger spear corps of several 10,000 persons.⁷⁶ The manner in which firearms were

⁷⁴ Yuan Renyuan, “Cili jiandang ji gongyun qingkuang” [The conditions surrounding the founding the party and the workers’ movement in Cili], *Cili wenshi ziliao* [Cili historical materials] 1 (1988), pp. 14-15; Liu Shaochu, “Dagemin shiqi Cili de nongmin yundong” [Cili’s peasant movement during the period of the great revolution], *Cili wenshi* [Cili history] 4 (1991), p. 18.

⁷⁵ Zhang Tongbao, “Zhuzhou xian yu nongmin yongdong gaikuang” [The general situation of the peasant movement in the Zhuzhou county area], *Zhuzhou xian wenshi ziliao* [Zhuzhou county historical materials] 1 (1986), p. 106.

⁷⁶ Jiang Yuzhou, pp. 29, 32.

incorporated into such larger forces was not always clear, but given the need for more specialized training a common pattern, as seen in the Ningxiang case, was to create separate firearm units. The effect was to replicate, in some ways, the allowance for the formation of standing corps within broader *aihutuan* in the peasant representative proposal noted above. The key point was to inhibit the standing forces armed with guns from becoming autonomous bases of power by subsuming them under mass militia structures controlled by mass associations. To the extent that Communist Party members or their sympathizers in turn largely controlled these associations, though, they would emerge in effect the initial military arms of the Communist Party.

While the actual organization of class-based mass militia in the counties continued to expand, the final resolution of the provincial government's position on the organization of mass militia only came with the issue of new household conscription militia (*aihutuan*) regulations in early April 1937. These regulations finalized the decision to abolish of all previous militia organizations and forces, in the process voiding and replacing the *tuanfang* regulations issued by Tang's government the previous summer.⁷⁷ Administration of the household conscription system would be provided through the establishment of *aihutuan* bureaus at the county, district (*qu* 區) and township (*xiang* 鄉) levels. (*Qu* and *xiang* were newly standardized units for sub-county administration). The statist impulses of the previous *tuanfang* reform program were repeated, with the county magistrate still serving in a co-post as head of the county-level *aihutuan* bureau. As in the previous *tuanfang* system a vice head was to be nominated from the community (with appointments by the Civil Administration Department at the request of the county government).

The regulations left no doubt but that the government would hold ultimate authority over

⁷⁷ "Hunan gexian aihutuan zhanxing zhangcheng" [Hunan county household conscription militia provisional regulations," *Hunan sheng zhengfu gongbao*, 1927: 34 (10 April), pp. 5-10.

the mass militia system. As in the case of the previous *tuanfang* regulations, though, provisions were also made for community participation. The most important change from the previous regulations was the elimination of any mention of gentry involvement in the nomination of the vice head or in other supervisory matters. This supervisory role was now entirely assigned to public organizations, but with careful delineation of their representational allocations. Thus, the vice head nomination meeting would include all local county officials, a representative from the county party branch, two people from the peasant association, and one representative each from merchant's, student's, women's, and teachers' associations. Local self-government organs would nominate lower level bureau heads and militia unit officers for appointment by the county government, again with approval or guarantees from public organizations. The drive by Communist and other leftist activists to place mass militia under the direct control of peasant associations was thus rejected. Instead, the legitimation of (and by) multi-class and multi-group public organizations announced that household conscription militia were meant to be community not class based.

The shift away from largely standing *tuanfang* forces to *aihutuan* mass militia was clearly meant to signal a popularization of local self-defense functions. Certainly a number of advantages were seen in mass militia; unpaid and part-time militiamen were both more economical and less responsive to manipulation as a power resource for potential local bullies and evil gentry. Ideologically, though, mass militia was also expected to reinforce the idea that militia were, and should be, a military force recruited from and serving the "people." Significantly, unlike previous *tuanlian* mass militia that normally called on each family to designate one adult to participate in self-defense activities, the 1927 *aihutuan* regulations called for the participation of *all* males from the ages of eighteen to forty. (These men would then be

organized into a hierarchy of units from 10-man squads (*ban* 班), to 30-man platoons (*pai* 排), to 60-man corps (*dui* 隊), placed under the control of their respective *aihutuan* bureaus). This was a demand that had the potential not only to increase military capacity but also to create a more involved, and politically aware, citizenry. Thus it was no accident that the new regulations again placed an emphasis on regular political instruction as well as military training for militia members.

The main reason that the expansive *tuanlian* system of mass militia in the mid-nineteenth century had largely given way to a system of local standing militia forces by the early Republic was not only the disinclination of the population to dedicate so much time to militia duties but also the inability the poorly trained part-time militiamen in practice to respond effectively to the range of threats to local order that could occur. Recognizing this, these *aihutuan* regulations did not insist on limiting militia only to its mass form, but again allowed *aihutuan* organizations at each level to recruit standing forces when a need for such forces could be shown (allowing forces of 20 to 120 men at the county level and 10 to 30 men at the district level). In an attempt to avoid mercenary forces divorced from the communities they were supposed to serve, though, the regulations mandated that the men recruited for these forces be drawn from the regular mass militia for short one-year terms.

The problem with these *aihutuan* regulations is that they no longer had much ability to affect the facts on the ground where the real struggles for the control of local military forces were taking place. Although these regulations seemed an attempt to return to the community model of mass militia, most mass militia organized up to this point were in fact class-based, and were often controlled directly by mass organizations rather than county governments. Rather than being unauthorized actions by local activists, the development of class-based mass militia

was periodically encouraged and sanctioned by various political and party authorities. For example, in the case of Qiyang County cited above, peasant association activists received government and party approval to use arms seized from regular militia forces to create a peasant self-defense militia (*ziweituan*).⁷⁸ February 1927, the Xiangxiang County peasant association received orders from the provincial government to establish a peasant self-defense army (*ziweijun*).⁷⁹ (As seen in this case, over time self-defense “army” became the default designation for peasant mass militia that included both firearms and bladed weapons). In March 1927 the Hunan’s provincial party office petitioned the Nationalist central government for the creation of “peasant” self-defense armies.⁸⁰ In early April 1927, on the same day as the provincial government’s new *aihutuan* regulations were published in the government gazette, the Hunan Communist Party issued a proclamation calling for the establishment of peasant self-defense armies, and secret orders were reportedly sent from the provincial Nationalist Party office to all counties for local party branches to hand over guns to local peasant associations to support the formation of these armies.⁸¹ The new provincial *aihutuan* regulations were therefore competing with an array of contending voices, all speaking with comparable authority, pushing for the organization of mass militia on a class rather than a community basis.

Although the provincial *aihutuan* regulations seemed to be largely alone in rowing against the tide of opinion in favor of class-based militia, the diversity of official, party, and

⁷⁸ Bo Xilu, “pp. 16-17

⁷⁹ Wan Renxian, “Dageming shiqi Xiangxiang wuqu nongmin xiehui qinliji” [Personal record of Xiangxiang’s 5th district peasant association during the great revolution period], *Xiangxiang wenshi ziliao* [Xiangxiang historical materials] 1 (1986), p. 45.

⁸⁰ “Sheng dangbu wei nongmin qinguan” [Provincial party office petitions for the peasants], *Hunan minbao* [Hunan people’s news], 15 March 1927, reprinted in *Hunan lishi ziliao* [Hunan history materials] 1981: 2, pp. 93-94.

⁸¹ Li Lianghong, “Dageming shiqide Xinning xian nongmin yundong qingkuang” [The situation of the Xinning county peasant movement during the period of the great revolution], *Xinning wenshi* [Xinning history] 2 (1986), pp. 18-19.

organizational authorities weighing in on the issue of militia organization reflected the continuing tensions within the United Front over where authority in such matters should lie. This was ultimately the unsustainable situation that resulted in Chiang Kai-shek's purge of the Communist Party in east China on April 12, 1927—just two days after the issue of Hunan's *aihutuan* regulations. This incident seemed to intensify the call in Hunan (temporarily still under the control of the left-leaning Nationalist government in Wuhan) for the expansion of peasant self-defense armies.⁸² Thus just as Chiang's coup was being reported, the Hunan provincial peasants association ordered all county peasant associations to complete the formation of peasant self-defense armies, if they had not already done so, and to increase training in preparation for the final elimination of feudal power.⁸³

Under these circumstances, the provincial *aihutuan* regulations essentially became a dead letter. More relevant to the actual direction being taken in militia development in this was another set of regulations issued around the same time for the organization of peasant self-defense armies.⁸⁴ Mirroring the *aihutuan* regulations, these self-defense armies would be organized hierarchically starting from the township (*xiang*) level, to the district (*qu*), and then to the county. The main difference is that rather than being subordinated to these administrative units, they were attached directed to peasant associations at each level. Militiamen would also be

⁸² Among the slogans raised at a large anti-Chiang demonstration held in Changsha immediately after the arrival of the news of Chiang's coup, were ones calling for the dissolution of all militia (*tuanfang*) military force in the province, and the provincial-wide organization of peasant self-defense armies. "Guanyu 'Mari shibian' de pianduan huiyi" [Fragmented memories concerning the Mari Incident], *Hunan wenshi ziliao* [Hunan historical materials] 5 (1963), p. 31.

⁸³ *Hunan minbao*, 14 April 1927, reprinted in *Hunan lishi ziliao* [Hunan history materials] 1981: 2, p. 98.

⁸⁴ A copy of these regulations, "Hunan nongmin ziweijun zuzhi dagang" [Hunan peasant self-defense armies organization outline], can be found in *Hunan lishi ziliao* [Hunan history materials] 1981: 2, pp. 94-97. The editors note that this document was found among materials for a county-level peasant self-defense cadre training class.

drawn exclusively from the membership of the peasant associations between the ages of eighteen and thirty. Twenty-percent of the peasant association membership was expected to participate in these forces, broken down into two groups: a larger police guard (*jingbeidui* 警備隊) who would operate only within their own county, district or township and a smaller volunteer corps (*yiyoungdui* 義勇隊) that could be sent to aid neighboring counties or districts.⁸⁵ As in the case of aihutuan regulation, an allowance was made, when needed, for the formation of standing units at each level. But the militiamen these standing units were supposed to rotate regularly out of the broader mass militia. Stress was also placed on military and political training at each level, with instructors provided by the peasant association.

The seriousness, as well as the political inclinations, of this expanded system of self-defense armies was seen in a decision made jointly by Hunan's provincial worker and peasant associations to create a special training program for self-defense army cadre, with an initial class of two hundred students.⁸⁶ A detailed curriculum was established for this program, including three hours of military drill and six hours of classroom instruction every day. Total classroom work was divided into 332 hours of military instruction and 250 hours of political instruction. The Communist influence on this curriculum was considerable. While six hours were devoted to Sun Yat-sen's Three Principles of the People, sixteen hours were set for the study of Marxism and Leninism as well as classes on the history of the Russian revolution, the politics and

⁸⁵ Before the National Revolution, *jingbeidui* the a designation for full-time police guards usually serving under the county magistrate. The stipulation that this mass-based *jingbeidui* would not be required to serve outside their home areas seems a concession to long-standing popular opposition to the ways in which the recruitment of militia was sometimes turned into a conscription system for full-time military service in armies that could be dispatched to distant battlefields.

⁸⁶ A detailed account of this decision and the program curriculum was originally published in Hunan minbao [Hunan people's news], 22 April 1927. This article was reprinted in *Hunan lishi ziliao* [Hunan history materials] 1981: 2, pp. 98-101.

economy of the Soviet Union, and materialist historical analysis.⁸⁷

This training program, developed by provincial-level worker and peasant associations, was a clear indication of an intention to institutionalize self-defense armies as a form of class-based mass militia. Equally important, it sought to solidify the commitment to class struggle within the National Revolution that had started out as a minority position of the Community Party as a “bloc within” the United Front with the Nationalist Party. Nonetheless, it would be the process of pursuing the class-based vision, in militia organization as in other area of society, that would lay bare the increasing differences between the Nationalist and Communist parties and bring the United Front to an end.

Conclusion

The promotion of peasant self-defense armies marked the culmination of efforts to transform Hunan’s local militia to serve the needs of the National Revolution. As this transformation had evolved, the main character of Hunan’s militia had shifted from full-time standing forces organized by local elites to an emphasis on more popularly based mass militia. Although standing militia forces were by no means eliminated, every effort had been made to subordinate these forces to revolutionary leadership, and the ultimate goal was to incorporate them within, and subordinate them to, mass militia systems. Perhaps more importantly, the widespread organization of peasant self-defense armies also marked a rejection of the

⁸⁷ The following is the complete list of topics for this political instruction, with the number of hours assigned to each topic in parentheses: imperialism and China (10), 3PP (6), party policies (30), issues of the Chinese revolution (16), issue in world revolution (20), other political-economic relations between China and world (12), the politics and economy of the Soviet Union (12), Socialism (10), peasant issues and the peasant movement (16), labor issues and the labor movement (16), revolutionary histories of other countries (10), Russian revolutionary history (14), Chinese revolutionary history (8), Nationalist government and Soviet organization (20), district and township self government issues (hours not included), Leninism and Marxism (16), economics (8), materialist historical analysis (8), the United Front (4), history of socialist transformation (10), and technical work (4).

community-centered focus of traditional militia, and well as the family foundations of previous mass militia systems. The formation of peasant self-defense armies (and their lesser worker counterparts) established class as the main foundation for militia organization. Similarly, the statist impulses in Nationalist Party approaches to the Nationalist Revolution, reflected in both *tuanfang* regulations for standing forces and *aihutuan* regulations for mass militia, were largely supplanted by a priority seen in self-defense army organizations for the authority of mass associations over society and government. More than just a disinterested theoretical issue about ideal governance, the result of allowing local militia power to come under the control of mass associations was to increase the weight of the Communist Party at the expense of Nationalist Party-dominated state structures.

No matter how the tide in Hunan seemed to be flowing in favor of the expansion of Communist-led mass movements, and the concurrent growth of local militia power along class lines, Chiang's April 12 coup inspired hitherto suppressed voices in Hunan who had grown increasingly disturbed by the growing influence of the Communist Party and its promotion of class struggle. On May 21, a coup initiated from within the Hunan army, known as the Mari Incident, began the process of extending Chiang's purge of Communism into Hunan. This coup would mark the end of Hunan's experiment in class-based militia organization—at least until the triumph of the Communist Party in 1949. At the same time, it also opened the way for a return to the statist approach to militia organization by the post-Mari provincial regime. While still envisioned as serving revolutionary aims of strengthening state power, this militia would take on new, and in some way dominant, goal in the suppression of Communist insurrection. To that extent that militia were deployed for this purpose, though, the replacement of community unity over class struggle as an underlying principle of militia organization did not result in greater

social harmony but intensified social conflict.

The widespread proliferation of class-based militia during the National Revolution period does raise the question of why the Communist Party and its allies, who dominated these forces, were unable to maintain the upper hand in the revolutionary struggle. Chinese historians have generally blamed the leadership of Chen Duxiu for failing to mobilize peasant and worker self-defense forces to counter the purge carried out in Hunan with the Mari Incident—or more to the point that he ordered popular forces, who were poised to seize power, to step down while he pursued the false hope of a peaceful resolution that would preserve the United Front. This criticism, however, assumes that if “unleashed” the peasant and worker forces would have been able to reverse the chain of events set in motion by the Mari Incident. In purely military terms, without even considering other political issues that might have affected popular support for the Communist party, this is a debatable proposition.

In the end, the establishment of peasant and worker associations, and by extension the local military forces created under their auspices, had depended on the nurturing environment provided by a supportive revolutionary regime and that regime’s armies. With Chiang’s coup and the Mari Incident that environment became more hostile than supportive. Meanwhile, the ability of Communist Party activists to maintain control over the militia forces they had taken over or developed was far from certain. In many cases, local militia leaders who had preserved their position by accommodating themselves to the revolution opportunistically changed sides again when in the new political environment following the Mari Incident.⁸⁸ Despite the

⁸⁸ Shaoyang County was the site of one famous case that led to a massacre of revolutionary leaders by peasant self-defense militia leaders who turned against them. Xiao Shengqiang, “Tuanshan can’an” [The Tuanshan massacre], *Shaodong wenshi* [Shaodong history] 2 (1989), pp. 19-21; Yu Wenquan, “‘Tuanshan can’an’ ceji” [Sideline record of the “Tuanshan massacre”]. *Shaodong wenshi* [Shaodong history] 2 (1989), pp. 27-28.

emphasis given to political indoctrination, many of the revolutionary activists who assumed personal leadership over militia forces actually had insufficient time to carry out this indoctrination or assure themselves of the political reliability of their forces.⁸⁹ The shallowness of their control was shown when militia leaders who had been ousted in the original revolutionary takeover again took advantage of the changed situation to regain leadership over their original subordinates.⁹⁰ Finally cases where Communist-led self-defense armies sought to attack or defend themselves against numerically inferior military forces were almost universally unsuccessful.⁹¹

The experience of organizing peasant and worker self-defense forces was not, however, a total loss. The most committed portions of these forces took to the hills with their Communist Party leaders to form the core of the Party's initial insurrectionary forces. Meanwhile the need for the creation of a regular army, the Red Army, alongside popular militia was a clear negative lesson of the failures of 1927. Even so, the experience gained in the organization of peasant self-defense forces continued to prove useful not just in recruiting for the Red Army but in continuing

⁸⁹ Bo Xilu, "Huiyi Qiyang nongyun" [Remembering Qiyang's peasant movement], *Hunan wenshi ziliao xuanju* [Hunan historical materials selections] 16 (1982), p. 73. Luo Shouxin, Li Huayuan, Lei Chifeng, Li Guangzhao, "Dageming shiqi Qiyang xian nongmin yundong shimo" [Beginning and end of Qiyang county's peasant movement during the great revolution period], *Qiyang wenshi ziliao* [Qiyang historical materials] 1 (1984), p. 6. During his investigation of the Hunan peasant movement, Mao Zedong had warned that simply taking over former "landlord" militia was not enough; attention also had to be paid to the political transformation of these forces. In making this point he was responding to many cases where the "reorganization" of militia forces only involved opportunistic name changes. Chen Xinxian, p. 7. Other sources also noted the superficiality of militia takeovers. Liu Zizhi, "Guanyu chengzhi tuhaolieshen de tebie fating" [Concerning the special court for the punishment of local bullies and evil gentry], *Hengyang wenshi ziliao* [Hengyang historical materials] 1 (1983), p. 73.; "Mari shibian hou fandongpai zai Hengyang de taotian dazui" [The grave crimes of reactionaries in Hengyang after the Mari Incident], manuscript no. 64-376, Hunan zhengzhi xieshang huiyi, wenshiban [Historical materials office, Hunan political consultative conference].

⁹⁰ Cite WSZL cases.

⁹¹ Cite WSZL cases.

to raise class-based militia that if not determining the final outcome of the Communist-Nationalist struggle would still play an important supporting role in ultimate Communist success.

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