

persuade a huge new constituency of potential supporters that his version of nationalism, with its social and moral content, would meet the needs and wants of India's rural masses, and that Indian problems required Indian answers. He created, in short, an Indian rather 'British-Indian' nationalism. Thirdly (and partly in consequence), Gandhi made nationalism – and the Congress – a grass-roots movement, drawing in peasants, women, industrial workers, the 'tribal' peoples of the forests and hills, and the untouchables. Of course the level of popular interest and the scale of Congress membership could rise and fall (as they did after 1922). But the cadre of Gandhians pursuing 'village uplift', or promoting Gandhi's schemes of education and hygiene, formed a network of activists ready and waiting for the next *satyagraha* campaign. It remained to be seen when their chance would come.²³

For the time being, however, even nominal self-rule of the kind granted to Egypt remained a distant prospect. Gandhi had shaken British self-confidence badly. But the 'steel frame' of Britain's Raj – the army, police and bureaucracy – with its tens of thousands of loyal Indian servants, was still in place. The religious and social divisions that Gandhi had been so anxious to bridge made a grand nationalist coalition against alien control something to hope for, not a practical basis for political action in the immediate future.

China was different. Between 1919 and 1922, against all the odds, Chinese leaders successfully asserted China's right to full sovereignty that had seemed at such risk after 1890. They won China a place on the new League Council, the steering committee of the League of Nations. By refusing to sign the Treaty of Versailles (because of the clause on Shantung), they eventually forced a new settlement for East Asia in the Washington treaties of 1921–2. They even secured what had seemed almost impossible before 1914: a programme to reverse the 'unequal treaties' – winning tariff autonomy, abolishing extraterritorial privilege, and shutting down (gradually) the numerous foreign enclaves on Chinese soil. China's revolt against a global order in which empire was the norm was far

more complete than almost anywhere else in the Afro-Asian world.²⁴

Of course, part of the reason was that, although the West had encroached upon China's independence in the nineteenth century (a number of Western countries enjoyed extraterritorial rights, including the USA, Brazil, Peru and Bolivia), the Chinese had fiercely resisted reduction to a form of semi-colonial dependence in the crucial decade before 1914. Instead, the need to turn China into a nation state (not a dynastic empire) with a republican government to express the popular will was accepted with astonishing rapidity among the educated class. The explosion of feeling in May 1919 when China's claim to Shantung was rejected in Paris showed that this new style of patriotism had not stopped there. The May Fourth movement began among students in Peking. But it quickly became a much wider protest, enlisting merchants and artisans in its demonstrations and boycotts, and spreading far beyond the capital. It was graphic proof that foreign business interests could be badly damaged by popular outrage, and that the angry crowds would take their cue from the nationalist rhetoric of the newliterate. Yet this new popular mood was not translated into a strong national government. Between 1919 and 1922, China had a government in Canton as well as one in Peking. The Peking government was a cockpit of factions, and its writ hardly ran beyond the walls of the city.²⁵ Across much of China, the real voice of authority was the provincial *dujun*, the military commander or (a hostile translation) 'warlord'.²⁶ By 1922 the simmering hostility of these provincial bosses and their factional groupings had set off the civil wars that dominated China's politics until the capture of Peking by Chiang Kai-shek in 1928. The enthusiastic endorsement of China's sovereign statehood and the solemn promises to respect it in the Washington treaties are thus somewhat puzzling. If anything, the domestic turmoil of post-imperial China seemed to invite the interference of the foreign powers as much if not more so than before 1914.

It had certainly seemed so during the First World War. In January 1915, as soon as they grasped the gigantic scale of the European conflict, the Japanese presented their famous Twenty-One Demands to the Chinese government, on War Office paper 'watermarked with machine guns and dreadnoughts'.²⁷ They proposed the mother and father of unequal treaties. China was pressed to agree to a Japanese takeover of German claims in Shantung, to extend Japanese concessions and leases in Manchuria for the rest of the century, not to borrow foreign capital without Japan's permission to develop Fukien (a coastal province far to the south of Japan's usual sphere), and to take on Japanese advisers 'in political, financial and military affairs'.²⁸ To all intents, they proposed a virtual protectorate. Without allies or arms, the Chinese government gave in, and the treaty was signed. It opened the way for the rapid entrenchment of Japanese influence in the Chinese north, and the increasing dependence of the Peking government on loans from Tokyo. The fall of the tsar and the break-up of his empire ended the last real check upon Japanese dominance: neither Britain nor the United States was willing to challenge Tokyo at this stage of the war. When they did agree to intervene in Siberia to stop Russia falling under German control (the expected result of the Brest-Litovsk treaty in March 1918), it was Japan that supplied much the largest force, and expected to reap much the largest gain: extending its influence deep into Inner Asia. The Shantung decision in 1919 was thus of a piece with the massive shift of power in wartime East Asia. As China's unity fractured (the rival Canton government had appeared in 1917), and its provincial bosses took the Japanese shilling, it seemed that it might become part of a vast informal empire whose centre was Tokyo.

Yet this was not what happened. The explanation lies in a powerful convergence between China's politics and the conflictual relations of the great powers in East Asia. It was true that Peking could not impose its will on the provincial dujuns. But there was little doubt that on questions of 'rights recovery' the nationalist programme of its intellectual elite (centred in Peking's new university)²⁹

commanded mass support in the treaty-port cities of maritime China. That was the significance of the May Fourth movement. By the end of 1920, the Peking government had revoked the extraterritorial privileges of Germany and Austria–Hungary, its wartime enemies. The Bolshevik government had renounced Russia’s claims. It seemed more than likely that Peking would go on to denounce the privileged status of the treaty powers that remained, including Britain, Japan and the United States.³⁰ It was easy to imagine the explosive effect of such a move in Shanghai and elsewhere, and the enormous difficulty of defending foreign interests and property against the mass demonstrations and boycotts that seemed certain to follow. It seemed safer by far to enlist Peking’s support for a gradual change. The British and the Americans had an added reason to come to terms with Peking. They had watched with alarm the growing power of Japan, and mistrusted the ‘militarist clique’ that directed its policy.³¹ Throughout 1920 they pressed the Japanese government to pool its commercial concessions in an international consortium, and opposed its claim to a special position ‘beyond the Wall’ in Manchuria.³² This Anglo-American pressure was feared and resented in Tokyo, but Japanese leaders had other reasons to change course in East Asia. They faced domestic unrest, the outgrowth in part of the economic strains of wartime.³³ The Siberian expedition, with its costs and its losses, was deeply unpopular.³⁴ Without the old Russian threat, it was even harder to justify. In Korea, where an independence campaign had been brutally crushed in 1919, political tranquillity was urgently needed.³⁵ And the Japanese shared the Westerners’ alarm that anti-foreign feeling might get out of hand in China and inflict big losses on their business interests, especially by Chinese boycott of their textile exports.³⁶ The case for conciliation had become overwhelming.

The upshot was the remarkable settlement embodied in the Washington treaties of 1921–2. The Western powers and Japan guaranteed the independence and integrity of the Chinese republic.

Provision was made to reform the unequal treaties. No power was to seek any special concessions or make exclusive deals. China, it seemed, had recovered the national dignity painfully surrendered in the chaotic 1890s. But the status revolution was not the end of the story. From 1922 onward, foreign interests in China faced militant nationalism on a growing scale. A second revolution, social and political, made the Washington treaties' leisurely timetable for the recovery of China's full sovereignty look strangely complacent. The epicentre was Canton, the southern metropolis. Canton had been the centre of anti-Ch'ing politics. The Cantonese, said an old China-coast diehard, were the 'Irish of China' (it was not meant as a compliment).³⁷ Canton was less than eighty miles from Hong Kong, which served as its outport, and a safe haven for dissent in imperial times. It was where Sun Yat-sen had struggled before 1911 to build up his revolutionary party, later the Kuomintang, or Nationalist Party (KMT).³⁸ But, without a mass following, Sun was poorly placed to exploit the growing antagonism of merchants and artisans towards the exactions and oppressions of the newprovincial rulers (many of them military) who had pushed aside the mandarin-scholars of the old imperial system. Nor could he appeal to the educated class (a category that included the young Mao Tsetung), who bitterly resented their displacement from power by warlords and soldiers. In 1922 he was even chased out of Canton by a warlord faction. But the next three years brought an astonishing change. For in 1923 Sun made an epic compact with an agent sent from Bolshevik Russia. He accepted the offer of military aid and a corps of Soviet advisers³⁹ to rebuild the KMT on the Leninist model, in partnership with the infant Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The KMT-CCP began to build a mass base among peasants and town workers.⁴⁰ And with its own party army it at last had the means to defeat the warlords and build a new state.⁴¹

The revolutionary year was 1925. It started badly for the KMT, which lost control of Canton (briefly), and its leader Sun to a premature death. But on 30 May labour tension in Shanghai (where

foreign enterprise was concentrated) burst into violence when the British police force in the International Settlement shot dead twelve Chinese during a large demonstration. A huge wave of protest swept up the Yangtze valley and along the coast to Hong Kong. On 23 June there was further shooting in the European enclave of Shameen in Canton. A general strike and boycott of British trade was organized in Hong Kong, in a direct challenge to the British authorities. The KMT now reaped the reward for its new credibility as a nationalist movement with the physical power to govern effectively. Soviet support, the anti-foreign mass movement and a bloody civil war between the warlords in the north suddenly opened the way to reunify China under a national government pledged to expel all foreign power.⁴² In July 1926 the KMT army set off from Canton on the 'Northern Expedition', destination Peking. By the end of the year it had reached Wuhan, the great crossroads city in the middle of China. Nanking and Shanghai lay within its grasp. China's titular sovereignty – hailed with enthusiasm at the Washington conference – had become frighteningly real. For the British, whose stake in the old order was largest, there began a race to withdraw from the most vulnerable outposts before the shooting started.⁴³ What the future held for the large foreign presence (Japanese and Western) in Shanghai, the greatest treaty port of all, was anyone's guess.

There is a strange but important epilogue to this tale of revolution and empire in the aftermath of war. Across much of Northern Eurasia, what mattered most was the fate of imperial Russia, apparently dissolving in chaos in 1918. As tsarist rule collapsed, the subject peoples of what Lenin had called the 'prison of nations' had a glimpse of freedom. In the Ukraine, the Caucasus and Central Asia, and among the ethnic minorities of Russia proper (like the Bashkirs and Tatars), independent regimes made their bid for power. On the face of things, their chances were good. In 1918–19 the Bolsheviks were struggling to survive in a civil war. Moreover, the Bolshevik view had favoured liberation for Russia's subject nationalities,