

Modern Asian Studies

<http://journals.cambridge.org/ASS>

Additional services for *Modern Asian Studies*:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



He, Who Has Sown the Wind: Karakhan, the Sino-Soviet conflict over the Chinese Eastern Railway, 1925–26, and the failure of Soviet policy in northeast China

NIKITA VUL

Modern Asian Studies / Volume 48 / Issue 06 / November 2014, pp 1670 - 1694
DOI: 10.1017/S0026749X13000152, Published online: 26 March 2014

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0026749X13000152

How to cite this article:

NIKITA VUL (2014). He, Who Has Sown the Wind: Karakhan, the Sino-Soviet conflict over the Chinese Eastern Railway, 1925–26, and the failure of Soviet policy in northeast China. *Modern Asian Studies*, 48, pp 1670-1694 doi:10.1017/S0026749X13000152

Request Permissions : [Click here](#)

*He, Who Has Sown the Wind: Karakhan,
the Sino-Soviet conflict over the Chinese
Eastern Railway, 1925–26, and the failure
of Soviet policy in northeast China**

NIKITA VUL

History Department, Peking University, China
Email: nephilem_2001@yahoo.com

Abstract

This article deals with the Sino-Soviet conflict of 1925–26 over the Chinese Eastern Railway, with special attention given to its background and consequences. In 1924, the Chinese Eastern Railway became a joint venture between the Soviet Union and China, creating fresh friction between the joint Soviet and Chinese managers which culminated in general manager A.N. Ivanov's prohibition on transporting military cargoes and troops, and Ivanov's arrest by Manchurian warlord-general Zhang Zuolin. Some scholars and diplomatists have viewed Ivanov's prohibition and the simultaneous rebellion by Chinese general Guo Songling against Zhang as a Soviet attempt to replace Zhang with a more manageable warlord. But this article argues that although the prohibition—a typical instance of back-and-forth Soviet diplomacy—was a coincidence, it was primarily the result of Soviet ambassador Lev M. Karakhan's tough stance and his rash decision-making, undertaken without seeking advice from Moscow. Zhang's victory in the 1926 clash convinced the Chinese that they had the power to take repressive measures against the Soviet Union's citizens and institutions, which led to the Sino-Soviet conflict of 1929 and exacerbated Japanese alarm over the Soviet's increasing strength in the region. This was to be a factor in the takeover of Manchuria in 1931 by Japan's Guandong Army, which eventually led to global war. This article, therefore, deals with the origins of world-changing events and thus is interesting to *Modern Asian Studies*' wider readership.

* I thank the anonymous referees and the editor. I would also like to thank Michael E. Chapman, associate professor of History at Peking University, for his assistance in the preparation of this article and for proofreading. I would also like to express my gratitude to Bruce A. Elleman, research professor, Maritime History Department, Center for Naval Warfare Studies, US Naval War College, for valuable comments on the draft.

Introduction

Few subjects in the history of modern diplomacy have caused as many quarrels as the Chinese Eastern Railway (here also referred to as 'the Railway'). Nevertheless, although several studies cover the Sino–Soviet conflict of 1929, there is little scholarly analysis of the conflicts that erupted following the merging of the Railway's management in 1924, when the railway became a joint venture between the Soviet Union and China. This culminated in the prohibition by A.N. Ivanov, the Railway's Soviet general manager, against transporting military cargoes and troops and his arrest by Manchurian warlord Zhang Zuolin. These conflicts and their origins are important. Zhang's victory in the 1926 clash convinced the Chinese that they had the power to take repressive measures against the supposedly all-powerful Soviet Union's citizens and institutions. In turn this led to the Sino–Soviet military conflict of 1929, and exacerbated Japanese alarm over increasing Soviet strength in the region, which was to be a factor in the takeover of Manchuria in 1931 by its Guandong Army.

It is understandable that Western writers such as P.S.H. Tang (1958), George Alexander Lensen (1974), and Oliver Edmund Clubb (1971) have tended to present detailed accounts of the events of 1925–26 without attempting to analyse their background.¹ Primary sources of the main party to the conflict—the Soviet Union—were classified until recently, forcing Lensen and Clubb to rely on Soviet newspapers and the heavily censored 'Documents of USSR Foreign Policy'. Tang had even fewer sources, since the volumes covering 1925–26 were only published in 1963 and 1964 respectively.² Similarly lacking sources, Chinese scholars have written surprisingly little about the history of the Railway during the 1920s, with extant works taking a narrative

¹ Peter S.H. Tang (1958). *Russian and Soviet Policy in Manchuria and Outer Mongolia, 1911–1931* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press), pp. 178–88; George Alexander Lensen (1974). *The Damned Inheritance: The Soviet Union and the Manchurian Crises, 1924–35* (Tallahassee: Diplomatic Press), pp. 13–21, 85–90; Oliver Edmund Clubb (1971). *China and Russia: the 'Great Game'* (New York: Columbia University Press), pp. 216–20.

² I.K. Koblyakov (ed.) (1963). *Dokumenty vneshnei politiki SSSR, t.8, 1 yanvarya – 31 dekabrya, 1925* [Documents of USSR Foreign Policy, Vol. 8, 1 January–31 December 1925] (Moscow: Gospolitizdat); I.M. Gorohov (ed.) (1964). *Dokumenty vneshnei politiki SSSR, t.9, 1 yanvarya – 31 dekabrya, 1926* [Documents of USSR Foreign Policy, Vol. 9, 1 January–31 December 1926] (Moscow: Politizdat). Cited hereafter as *DUFP*.

rather than an analytical form.³ With the exception of Georgyi Melihov, Russian historians have also followed a narrative approach.⁴ But factual errors and inconsistencies undermine Melihov's account, which initially blames Moscow for organizing a conspiracy where General Guo Songling rebelled against Zhang, but then states that Guo's rebellion took place at the sole initiative of Soviet ambassador to China Lev M. Karakhan.⁵ Melihov does not quote any archival documents to support these contentions, although several useful sources are now available. Even though most of those who were involved in the events on the Soviet side perished in the Great Purge, leaving little in the way of diaries or memoirs, a number of collections of documents have recently been published in Russia. This article employs these newly available sources to analyse the events of 1925–26 in the light of Soviet policy in northeast China.⁶

Was Ivanov's prohibition against transporting military cargoes and troops—and Guo's simultaneous rebellion against Zhang—a coincidence or it was a Soviet attempt to remove Zhang and replace him with a more manageable warlord? Zhang, for his part, had no doubt of the existence of a Soviet conspiracy against him, which is why, before he entered Beijing in 1926, he notified Karakhan that he could not guarantee the Soviet ambassador's personal safety.⁷

³ See, for example, Ma Weiyun (2010). *Zhongdong tielu yu Heilongjiang wenhua: Zhong-E (Su) guanxi zhong zhongdong tielu wenti* [The CER and Heilongjiang's culture: The problem of the CER in Sino-Russian (Soviet) relations] (Harbin: Heilongjiang daxue chubanshe), pp. 153–59; Zheng Changchun (1987). *Zhongdong tielu lishi bian nian: 1895–1952* [The history of the CER in 1895–1952: Chronological order of the events] (Harbin: Heilongjiang renmin chubanshe).

⁴ N.E. Ablova (2005). *K.V.Zh.D. i rossiskaya emigratsiya v Kitae: mezhdunarodny i politicheskiy aspekty istorii (perвая polovina 20 veka)* [The Chinese Eastern Railway and Russian emigration in China: International and political aspects, during the first half of the twentieth century] (Moscow: Russkaya panorama), pp. 145–67.

⁵ G.V. Melihov (2007). *Rossiyskaya emigratsiya v mezhdunarodnykh otnosheniyakh na Dalnem Vostoke, 1925–1932* [Russian emigration in the system of international relations in the Far East, 1925–32] (Moscow: Vikmo-M, Russkiy put), pp. 70, 76.

⁶ M.L. Titarenko (ed.) (2008). *Perepiska I.V. Stalina i G.V. Checherina s polpredom SSSR v Kitae L.M. Karakhanom: documents, avgust 1923–1926 godov* [Intercourse in correspondence between I.V. Stalin, G.V. Checherin and Soviet ambassador in China L.M. Karakhan: Documents, August 1923–26] (Moscow: Natalis). Cited hereafter as *SCKD*. G. Hengyu and M.L. Titarenko (eds) (1994). *VKP(b) Komintern i natsionalno-revolutsionnoe dvizhenie v Kitae: dokumenty t. I. 1920–1925* [AUCP(b), Comintern and national-revolutionary movement in China: documents, Vol. 1, 1920–25] (Moscow: Buklet). Cited hereafter as *AUCP(b)*.

⁷ V.V. Sokolov (1983). *Na boyevykh postah diplomaticheskogo fronta: zhizn i deyatel'nost' L.M. Karakhana* [At the battle stations of diplomatic forefront: Life and work of L.M. Karakhan] (Moscow: Politizdat), p. 137.

Zhang—known as the ‘Old Marshal’—was a guerrilla leader back in the times of the Russo–Japanese war. Zhang, the ‘Manchurian Tiger’, was ‘a product of Manchurian mountains and forests’, who, by his own admission, was ‘educated in the school of forestry [banditry]’⁸—and was not someone likely to forget Karakhan’s threats back in 1923 to take the Railway by force.⁹

British diplomats shared Zhang’s views: for them it was ‘difficult to believe that the Soviets were not partners—or even the prime movers’ in the plot to overthrow him. The British minister in China Sir Ronald Macleay had the impression that the Russians had been ‘conspiring with [Zhang Zuolin’s] enemies to create a military diversion in [Zhang’s] own territory’ while his armies were away near Beijing. In his dispatch of 1 February 1926 to Chamberlain, Macleay labelled as ‘idle speculations’ the attempts to understand ‘whether the Soviet Government or [Zhang], or even both parties simultaneously, deliberately provoked the recent crisis, or whether the matters came to a head without any encouragement’. At that time, such attempts might truly have seemed idle—but idle they were not in view of the consequences of the crisis.¹⁰

So, was Ivanov’s prohibition and Guo’s simultaneous rebellion against Zhang a coincidence, or was it a Soviet attempt to remove Zhang and replace him with more a manageable warlord? If it was a conspiracy, who plotted it—Ivanov? Or did the orders come from Moscow? In this article, I will first review the events that happened in the public arena and then examine what was happening offstage. I will argue that while the prohibition was just another episode of back-and-forth Soviet diplomacy, it was primarily the result of Karakhan’s tough stance and his premature, rash decisions, which he often made without seeking advice from Moscow. To paraphrase the Old Testament prophet Hosea, Karakhan was the man who sowed the wind, and consequently he reaped the ensuing whirlwind. Guo’s

⁸ John Benjamin Powell (1945). *My Twenty-five Years in China* (New York: Macmillan Company), p. 88.

⁹ Karakhan mentions in his letter to Georgy Chicherin, people’s commissar for Foreign Affairs in the Soviet government, that he threatened Zhang Zuolin with Soviet military invasion of Manchuria. He told Zhang that the Soviet state had an earnest desire to peacefully resolve the Railway issue ‘although the military option will not present any problems at all’. L.M. Karakhan to G.V. Chicherin, Beijing, 11 September 1923, *SCKD*, p. 73.

¹⁰ F5728/5681/10, Weekly Summary of the Events in China, 27 November 1925, in Robert L. Jarman (ed.) (2001). *China: Political Reports, 1911–1960. Vol. 3: 1924–27* (London: Archive Editions), p. 189, cited in Lensen, *Damned Inheritance*, pp. 85, 87.

rebellion happened to coincide with the prohibition, but it turned out to be the straw that broke the camel's back and ignited the conflict that had been smouldering because of contradictory, inconsistent, and poorly planned Soviet policymaking in northeastern China.

On the surface

The Sino–Soviet ‘Agreement on General Principles for the Settlement of the Questions Between the Republic of China and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics’, signed on 31 May 1924, and the ‘Agreement for the Provisional Management of the Chinese Eastern Railway’, concluded on the same day, opened a new page in the history of relations between China and Russia, as well as the Chinese Eastern Railway.¹¹ In accordance with these agreements, the Beijing government recognized the Soviet Union through establishing diplomatic and consular relations between the two contracting parties and transferring the legation and consular buildings that had formerly belonged to the tsarist government. Both parties agreed that the Chinese Eastern Railway was ‘a purely commercial enterprise’. Chinese government officials acknowledged that the Railway belonged to the Soviet Union by stating that it, along with its appurtenant properties, shares, and bonds, could be redeemed by China with Chinese capital, though the sum and conditions governing the redemption as well as the procedure for the transfer of the Railway were left for negotiation at a special conference to be convened at a later date. The agreement also prohibited the existence and activities of groups and organizations within the respective territories of China and the Soviet Union whose aim was to commit acts of violence against the governments of the contracting parties, and stipulated that the future of the Chinese Eastern Railway must be determined by the

¹¹ For the details about the conclusion of these treaties, and the events that preceded them, see Bruce A. Elleman (1994). ‘The Soviet Union’s Secret Diplomacy Concerning the Chinese Eastern Railway, 1924–1925’, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 53:2, pp. 459–86. On 20 January 1925, the Soviet Union also signed a convention with Japan. This convention recognized the validity of the Portsmouth Peace Treaty, which ended the Russo-Japanese War, and Japan’s authority over the South Manchurian Railway, which helped support the Soviet goal of taking full control of the Railway away from China.

Republic of China and the Soviet Union ‘to the exclusion of any other third party or parties’.¹²

As to the ‘Agreement for the Provisional Management of the Chinese Eastern Railway’, the first and the third articles stipulated that five Chinese and five Russian directors would comprise the Railway’s administrative board. Whereas the board’s president, who was also to be the director-general, had to be Chinese, the manager, where in fact all power was concentrated, had to be a Soviet citizen. This manager had two assistant managers: one Russian and one Chinese. Article II stated that the board of auditors would comprise five people, with two of them, including the chairman, appointed by China and three by the Soviet Union. These officers were to be the board’s appointees, subject to confirmation by the Soviet and Chinese governments. Article IV vested the board with the authority to appoint the chiefs and assistant chiefs of the Railway’s various departments, the positions falling equally between the two countries, so if a departmental chief was Chinese, then his assistant chief would be Soviet, and vice versa. Article V provided for the principle of equal representation between Soviet and Chinese nationals, and Article IX declared valid the statutes of the Chinese Eastern Railway company as approved on 4 December 1896 by the tsarist government—but only for six months until they could be suitably revised.¹³

The Chinese Eastern Railway ran through Manchuria, or the Three Eastern Provinces as the Chinese called it, controlled by Zhang. In July 1924, he refused to acknowledge the agreement signed in Beijing because the Railway was on ‘autonomous’ territory, that is, it was under the control of the Chinese central government.¹⁴ Zhang’s intervention gave the Soviets little option but to sign an agreement with Zhang’s government too, which they concluded in Mukden on 20 September 1924. This Mukden Agreement replicated the Beijing Agreement, except that Clause 2 of Article I provided for

¹² See Article I, Article VI, Article IX, clauses (1), (2), (3) and (5) of ‘Agreement on General Principles for the Settlement of the Questions Between the Republic of China and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics’ in Hollington Kong Tong (1929). *Facts About the Chinese Eastern Railway Situation (with Documents)* (n.p.; n.d.), pp. 132, 134–35.

¹³ See the ‘Agreement for the Provisional Management of the Chinese Eastern Railway’ in Tong, *Facts*, pp. 137–40.

¹⁴ M.I. Sladkovskiy (1977). *Istoriya torgovo-ekonomicheskikh otnosheniyi SSSR s Kitayem: 1917–1974* [The history of trade economic relations between USSR and China] (Moscow: Nauka), p. 63.

the free transfer of the Chinese Eastern Railway to China—essentially Manchuria—20 years earlier, in 1963.¹⁵ In addition, as historian Bruce A. Elleman notes, there was a secret protocol attached to the Mukden Agreement that gave Zhang exclusive authority to choose and appoint Chinese officials to various positions in the Railway, ‘thus giving him absolute control over the Chinese half of the CER’.¹⁶

On 3 October 1924, the Railway’s senior Chinese director notified his White Russian and Chinese colleagues that Zhang had ordered their dismissal and that a new Soviet–Chinese board of directors was to replace them. General Bao Guiqing was reconfirmed in his position as the Railway’s president. A.N. Ivanov, a Soviet citizen—and, according to different accounts, a former Perm Railway telegrapher, a former Vladivostok maritime worker, and a water transport agent of the Joint State Political Directorate—was appointed as the new general manager, and A.A. Eismont, another Soviet, became Ivanov’s assistant general manager.¹⁷ The new board dismissed the old one in a mere five minutes. At 12.15 pm, the solemn ceremony marking the handover of the Chinese Eastern Railway started. Shortly after the old general manager B.V. Ostrumov delivered his valedictory speech, Chinese police arrested him, along with his colleagues I.A. Mikhailov, S.L. Gondatti, S.T. Offenbergl, and A.V. Obolskyi.¹⁸ Zhu Qinglan, the head of the Special District of the Three Eastern Provinces, which encompassed the Chinese Eastern Railway’s right-of-way, issued the order but, according to rumours, it came after pressure from Ivanov. In spite of Ivanov’s promises that the clampdown on Railway staff would be limited to these arrests, the next day he declared that enemies of the Soviet state would hinder ‘by their presence’ the initiation of friendly ties between Russia and China, and thus should be removed. Arrests

¹⁵ See the ‘Agreement between the Government of the Autonomous Three Provinces and Soviet Russia’ in Tong, *Facts*, pp. 141–47.

¹⁶ Elleman, ‘The Soviet Union’s Secret Diplomacy’, p. 474.

¹⁷ V.N. Usov (2002). *Sovetskaya razvedka v Kitae: 20-ye gody 20-veka* [Soviet intelligence in China: The 1920s] (Moscow: Olma-press), p. 127.

¹⁸ Although it might seem that the Chinese acted under pressure from the new Soviet administration, it is most likely that the Chinese wanted both to please the Soviets and to execute their own plans—they had expressed great dissatisfaction with Ostrumov as early as February 1924, and had even organized demonstrations demanding his deposition. See F2304/2304/10 China Annual Report, 1924, Palairt to Chamberlain, Beijing, 7 May 1925, in Jarman (ed.), *China: Political Reports*, p. 140. Ostrumov’s case ended on 12 September when all prisoners were granted amnesty. See Political Summary of Consular Reports for Quarter, ending 30 September, in *ibid.*, p. 215.

continued, and on 7 October, the Railway's former chief accountant M.I. Stepunin shared the fate of his unfortunate colleagues. Local wags called the handover of the Chinese Eastern Railway the 'October Revolution on the railway'.¹⁹

So technically the main target of the 'Agreement for the Provisional Management of the CER' was achieved, and joint Sino-Soviet management was established, with the possibility of developing a good neighbourly relationship and a mutually beneficial exploitation of the Railway. Unfortunately, the reality fell short of the ideal. Soon after the transfer to joint management, conflicts began, stemming particularly from the revision of the old Railway statutes, as stipulated in Article IX and Article I, clause 14, of the Beijing and Mukden Agreements respectively. There were functional defects in the Railway's management too, which resulted in power being concentrated in the hands of Soviets directors and general manager Ivanov. According to British diplomat Michael Palairet, they consolidated their position 'with a view to bring[ing] the affairs of the railway entirely under their control', with tragic consequences.²⁰

In accordance with the Sino-Soviet agreements, revising the obsolete Railway statutes with a view to safeguarding Chinese interests was the most urgent and important task. In spite of the fact that the Soviet party in theory had agreed to form a committee to revise the old regulations, they brought to the first session several proposals which, instead of enlarging the powers vested in the Chinese party, provided for a further increase in the power of the Soviet general manager. This committee as well as the board of directors met several times with no result, due to the hard line and intractability of the Soviets, who 'wished to maintain the spirit of the old Statutes which symbolized Russian predominance in the making of decisions'.²¹ As a result of intentional delays and foot-dragging, the conference to discuss the revision of the statutes, as stipulated in Article II, did not take place until 26 August 1925. When it finally opened in Beijing, there was merely a formal exchange of greetings by the delegates. Karakhan's hasty departure for Moscow on the following day was the

¹⁹ Ablova, *K.V.Zh.D. i rossiskaya emigratsiya v Kitae*, pp. 158–59.

²⁰ See F2304/2304/10 China Annual Report, 1924, Palairet to Chamberlain, Beijing, 7 May 1925, in Jarman (ed.), *China: Political Reports*, p. 141.

²¹ Tang, *Russian and Soviet Policy*, p. 179.

subject of considerable hostile comment in the Chinese press, and the conference accomplished little.²²

Another problem was the joint administration of the Railway. Agreements in theory guaranteed Chinese equality in the administration but, in reality, the Soviet Union retained the dominant position. In spite of the existence of Article V and Article I, clause 10, of the Beijing and Mukden Agreements specifying that the various Railway posts must be filled on the basis of equal representation, these articles were effectively blocked by the stipulation that appointments be made 'in accordance with the ability and technical as well as educational qualifications of the applicants' because there was a shortage of qualified Chinese cadres. As a result, Soviet appointees outnumbered their Chinese colleagues by a ratio of three to two, took charge of 22 out of 26 managing committees, and eventually gained possession of 77 per cent of all posts on the Railway. The appointment of a Soviet general manager, who, as Palairet pointed out in his report, had been 'accused by the Chinese of adopting dictatorial methods', proved a crucial advantage for the Soviet Union. Since all board decisions required the consent of no fewer than six members, by evading the board's sessions or by abstaining from voting, the Soviets were easily able to tie up the Chinese members and block any of their initiatives, thus 'consolidating their position with a view to bring[ing] the affairs of the railway entirely under their control'. As British diplomat H. Phillips reported from Harbin, the Chinese members of the Board 'wield[ed] little influence' whereas Soviets were 'increasing their hold on the Chinese Eastern Railway'.²³

The Soviet's hold over the Railway zone was reflected in the shutting down of the its church department in November 1924, the prohibition of the teaching of religion in December 1924, and finally the dismissal of White Russian school officials in the spring of 1925, despite Chinese guarantees in October 1924 that this would not happen. The British consul in Harbin remarked that the switch to Soviet teachers in the formerly White Russian schools throughout the Chinese Eastern Railway zone 'affords first-class opportunities for propaganda work'. Chinese officials and elites were equally concerned with Ivanov's

²² F6107/2/10, Macleay to Chamberlain, Beijing, 28 October 1925, in Jarman (ed.), *China: Political Reports*, p. 255.

²³ Elleman, 'The Soviet Union's Secret Diplomacy', p. 476; see F2304/2304/10 China Annual Report, 1924, Palairet to Chamberlain, Beijing, 7 May 1925, in Jarman (ed.), *China: Political Reports*, p. 141; Political Summary for the March Quarter 1925, British Legation, Beijing, 5 May, 1925, in *ibid.*, p. 197.

support for Soviet organizations, such as the Railway's trade unions, and his pressure for the dismissal of White Russians, even if they had adopted Chinese nationality. Ivanov's cancellation of the Railway's annual subsidy of 175,000 gold roubles to Harbin's churches and his attempt to introduce soviet *chervonets* as a legal currency in the Railway zone added to the mounting tension.²⁴

On 9 April 1925, Ivanov attacked again, issuing order number 94, effective from 1 June 1925, stating that all Railway employees who had neither Chinese nor Soviet citizenship, and who had not yet officially applied for registration as citizens of either country by 31 May, or whose registration had been refused, would be dismissed. This unauthorized action, which Liu Cheng, the board's temporary president, characterized as 'disgraceful', led his permanent replacement Bao Guiqing to declare in turn that Ivanov had issued the order without board approval and thus it bore no legal force. On 19 May, Bao issued a declaration abolishing order number 94, which was posted all over Harbin. Karakhan hurried to help his protégé. First, he instructed Soviet consul general Ivan Grandt in Harbin to ignore Bao's declaration and implement Ivanov's order. Then, two days later on 23 May 1925, he sent a note to Chinese minister of foreign affairs Shen Ruilin, pointing out that Ivanov's order was fully justified and, as a proof, he referred to Article V, which laid out the principle of equal representation which thereby left no place for those with other citizenships or no citizenship at all. Karakhan went as far as to demand the recall of Bao's declaration as well as his dismissal, on the grounds that he 'had never been to Harbin and never took part in the sessions of the Board'. *Démarche* took effect, and, as a result of a meeting on 4 June between Grandt and Cai Yunsheng, the commissioner of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Harbin, 424 employees were dismissed. On 15 June 1925 Bao resigned and was replaced by Yu Chunghang. The Chinese backed down this time, but not for long.²⁵

On 10 November 1925, Ivanov issued an order, effective from 1 December, forbidding the transportation of Chinese troops on credit, on the grounds that the Mukden government already owed the Railway over \$14 million. The order was not enforced until 16 January 1926,

²⁴ F3028/3028/10 China Annual Report, 1925, Macleay to Chamberlain, Beijing, 2 June 1926, in *ibid.*, p. 306; Lensen, *Damned Inheritance*, p. 17.

²⁵ Political Summary for the March Quarter 1925, British Legation, Beijing, 5 May 1925, in *ibid.*, p. 208; Tang, *Russian and Soviet Policy*, p. 184; Ablova, *Chinese Eastern Railway*, p. 163; Note of USSR Plenipotentiary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of China Shen Ruilin, 23 May 1925, *DUFP*, Vol. 8, pp. 327–30.

when the Railway refused to transport Mukden troops, prompting the soldiers of the 26th Brigade to seize the Harbin-bound mail train number 4. On 17 and 18 January, Chinese troops wilfully began starting trains without obtaining the necessary permissions, ignored semaphores, and threatened railway workmen with execution if they did not obey their orders. On 21 January, Ivanov issued order number 128, decreeing an end to all movement on the Harbin–Kuangchengzi section, although the Chinese military administration had already paralysed the Railway’s southern line. The following afternoon, Chinese military authorities arrested Ivanov.²⁶

On 23 January, Karakhan conveyed a telegram from Soviet foreign minister Georgy Chicherin, and addressed to the Republic’s provisional chief executive Duan Qirui, to the Republic’s foreign affairs minister Wang Zhengting. The telegram was in fact an ultimatum that expressed Moscow’s resolution to defend its position. Chicherin described Ivanov’s arrest as ‘unheard of’, and declared that the Soviet Union expected the Chinese government to take ‘the necessary measures for the peaceful solution of the question without evasion of the investigation regarding the breaches of the agreement on the Chinese Eastern Railway by both parties’. He demanded that ‘within a period of three days complete order be restored on the Chinese Eastern Railway, the treaty be implemented, and Mr. Ivanov be freed’. In case the Chinese government failed ‘to secure a peaceful solution of these questions within the given period’, on Moscow’s behalf Chicherin asked the Chinese ‘to allow the USSR with her own forces to assure the implementation of the treaty and to defend the mutual interests of China and the USSR on the Chinese Eastern Railway’.²⁷

Ivanov was released on 25 January 1926 as the result of an agreement signed the previous day at Mukden between Consul General Krakovetskyi in Mukden and Gao Qinghe, the commissioner of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It was a compromise settlement, whereby the Chinese, on the one hand, recognized that

²⁶ F3028/3028/10 China Annual Report, 1925, Macleay to Chamberlain, Beijing, 2 June 1926, in Jarman (ed.), *China: Political Reports*, p. 307; Note of USSR plenipotentiary in China to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of China Wang Zhengting 19 January 1926, *DUFP*, Vol. 9, pp. 37–40; Telegram of Consul General of the USSR in Harbin to People’s Commissariat for Foreign Affairs, 22 January 1926, in *ibid*, pp. 43–44; Note of USSR plenipotentiary in China to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of China Wang Zhengting, 22 January 1926, *ibid*, Vol. 9, p. 44.

²⁷ Note of USSR plenipotentiary in China to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of China Wang Zhengting, 23 January 1926, *DUFP*, Vol. 9, pp. 47–58.

they had to pay for the transportation of their troops, while the Soviets, on the other hand, agreed to deduct the amount from China's share of annual profits and, as before, charge only half price for transporting troops.²⁸ Still, Ivanov's role in the incident discredited him, and the Soviets replaced him on 17 April with A.I. Yemshanov. Due to Zhang's continuing demands, Moscow also recalled Karakhan on 10 September 1926. The Old Marshal had good reasons for his animus toward Karakhan.

In deep waters

The 1925–26 conflict over the Chinese Eastern Railway and the events preceding it cannot be analysed without studying the Soviet Union's policy in northeast China. Moscow's active support for Feng Yuxiang was an open secret, known not only to the diplomats of the Foreign Powers but also to the public at large, since it was widely discussed in the newspapers.²⁹ It would be natural, therefore, to conclude that support for Zhang's enemy, Feng; the Soviet Union's aggressive, provocative policy toward the Chinese Eastern Railway; and the eventual rebellion of Guo Songling, who made an alliance with Feng against Zhang, were a chain of related events undertaken with Moscow's connivance. But the documentary evidence does not support this scenario.

Karakhan suggested to Moscow the rationale for supporting Feng as early as December 1924. In a letter to People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs Georgy Chicherin, Karakhan gave his opinion that the alliance with Feng would be an 'advantageous thing', and expressed the hope that if Feng would ally with the Guomindang, the latter would be able to obtain a base in one of the northern provinces. By supporting Feng, Karakhan was planning to kill two birds with one stone: as well as obtaining an alliance with the Guomindang in the north, he wanted to create a counterbalance to Zhang. 'We must in all force support groups directed against Zhang Zuolin and first of all Feng Yuxiang,' he wrote. Feng was 'the most decent of all the warlords'. According to Karakhan, this was not so much to 'keep a strict hand over Zhang' but rather to

²⁸ On the International Situation and Soviet Foreign Policy in 1926, *DUFP*, Vol. 9, p. 673.

²⁹ F2300/2/1, Palairot to Chamberlain, Beijing, 5 May 1925, in Jarman (ed.), *China: Political Reports*, p. 241; *China Express and Telegraph*, 11 June 1925, p. 404.

force him to 'at least' treat Soviets 'respectfully'. Still, it is important to note that the weapons Karakhan suggested sending to Feng were the Red Army's obsolete stocks. 'Cartridges, shells, rifles—I think a lot of stuff useless to our army is rusting now in depots. For example, old German rifles and cartridges, Japanese rifles—sometimes they are of crucial importance here.'³⁰ And yet, implausible though it seems, Karakhan was conducting parallel negotiations over arms shipments to Zhang, with the intention, as Karakhan explained, to avoid straining relations with Zhang and establishing amicable working relations on the Chinese Eastern Railway 'while he [Zhang] exists in [Mukden]'.³¹

Gradually the tone of Karakhan's letters to Moscow took on a more persistent tone. By the second half of March 1925, he already believed that war between Feng and Zhang was inevitable. In his dispatch to Stalin at the beginning of May, Karakhan insisted that if the clash between Zhang and Feng occurred soon, then Feng would lose, in which case the Soviet Union in northern China would find itself 'back at the bottom of a ladder'. At the end of May, Karakhan sent a letter to Stalin pointing out that Feng had not received a single round of ammunition, despite the promise that within a month 6,000 rifles and 6,000,000 rounds were coming his way. Karakhan was soon citing reports by Soviet militarists that Feng needed '30,000 rifles, 230 machine guns, 5,000 sabres, 115 guns of different types'. It was with growing ardour that Karakhan argued for the necessity of Soviet military assistance to Feng: 'His defeat will be qualified as our defeat, his victory—as ours.' And again, 'The fate of Feng is a matter of our honour.' On 29 May, Karakhan sent a message with similar content to Chicherin, in which he called the Soviet measures to support Feng 'insignificant' and stressed that 'We have already jumped into a game, and, willing or not, the fate of Feng is already bound with our prestige.'³²

Taking into account Karakhan's passion and persistent letters, by contrast replies from Moscow sound even more reserved. Although

³⁰ Karakhan to Stalin, Beijing, 15 February 1925, *SCKD*, p. 429. This plan was put into effect, as John Powell mentioned that Feng's soldiers carried Russian rifles, some of them American made, which had been sold or given to the tsarist government in the First World War. See Powell, *Twenty-five Years in China*, p. 86.

³¹ Karakhan to Chicherin, Beijing, 5 December 1924, *SCKD*, p. 395; Karakhan to Chicherin, Beijing, 1 March 1925, *SCKD*, pp. 462–63; Karakhan to Stalin, Beijing, 15 February 1925, *SCKD*, p. 429; Karakhan to Stalin, Beijing, 21 March 1925, *SCKD*, p. 477; Karakhan to Chicherin, Beijing, 22 March 1925, *SCKD*, p. 486.

³² Karakhan to Chicherin, Beijing, 22 March 1925, *SCKD*, p. 492; Karakhan to Stalin, Beijing, 4 May 1925, *SCKD*, p. 496; Karakhan to Stalin, Beijing, 29 May 1925, *SCKD*, pp. 523–24; Karakhan to Chicherin, Beijing, 29 May 1925, *SCKD*, p. 530.

Stalin admitted his prior concession that ‘Moscow would not be stingy’, in the next line he explained to Karakhan that he had meant ‘certain limits in the frames of which we can provide help. You understand that the numbers like twenty millions, ten millions and so on by all means are beyond the scope of our current possibilities.’ Stalin tried to soft-talk sense into Karakhan: ‘By all means one should be a revolutionary, but one cannot blast off the ground and liken an air-monger, it is wrong too.’ Stalin insisted on secrecy, believing that one of the most important things was ‘to conceal all the activities in China as much as possible’. Stalin similarly sought ‘to orientate Feng not on the help from Russia but on organization of the sources of permanent income at home in China’.³³

It is hard to quantify Moscow’s military assistance to Feng. There are documents verifying the decision to send arms, but the journey to Feng was a long one, and it is difficult to estimate what in fact reached him. The ‘List of distribution of ordnance material provided by military department in 1924/1925 and planned to be provided in 1925/1926’ does not make a distinction between weapons already dispatched and those that were only planned to be sent, giving general figures instead: 30,000 rifles, 172 machine-guns, 24 tachankas (a horse-drawn machine gun platform, usually a cart or an open wagon with a heavy machine gun installed in the back), 54 three-inch guns and 44,000 shells to go with them, four six-inch guns and 4,000 shells to go with them, 10,000 hand grenades, 4,000 cavalry sabres, 2,000 pikes, ten mortars and 1,000 rounds of ammunition to go with them, ten airplanes, 3,000 horses, and 3,000 saddles. Notwithstanding what had already reached Feng before his conflict with Zhang began, it is likely that by the end of September 1925 he had received only light weapons. The first decision to ship heavy arms (six aeroplanes and 20 guns) was undoubtedly the result of pressure from Karakhan who, by this time, had returned to Moscow and could exercise more influence.³⁴ Before that, aid was limited to rifles, ammunition, and

³³ Stalin to Karakhan, Moscow, 29 May 1925, *SCKD*, pp. 525–27. Feng, of course, did his best to make the region he controlled ‘self-supporting and capable of producing large revenues’ and ‘employed an extraordinary variety of methods to raise funds’. For more details, see James E. Sheridan (1966). *Chinese Warlord: The Career of Feng Yu-Hsiang* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), pp. 151–52, p. 157.

³⁴ Memorandum Report of Unshlikht and Borotnovskiy to Stalin, 30 September 1925, *AUCP(b)*, p. 631; Protocol No. 12 of the Session of the Chinese Commission of Political Bureau of the Central Committee of *AUCP(b)*, Moscow, 28 September 1925, *AUCP(b)*, p. 616.

instructors, while the monetary equivalent of material assistance was not to exceed one million roubles.³⁵ A dispatch from a British diplomat corroborates that as late as the end of October 1925, Soviet 'arms and ammunition' supplied to Feng consisted 'principally of rifles, machine guns, and small arms ammunition made in Austria during the war'.³⁶

Apart from the insufficient military support that Stalin provided to Feng, and his obvious reluctance to provide it, there are other pointers against the theory that Moscow was conspiring against Zhang in order to overthrow him. To plan a conspiracy, to be the plot's 'partners—or even the prime movers' as one British report put it, the Soviet government had to exert influence on the conspirators, namely Feng and Guo Songling.³⁷ Assistant military attaché V.A. Trifonov, who worked in Beijing during 1925–26 and perished during Stalin's Great Purge, left a draft of his report to the Political Bureau of the Central Committee and a diary, both of which draw a sad picture of the extent of Soviet influence in northeastern China.³⁸

According to Trifonov, Moscow had no influence over Feng, whom Trifonov described as a 'typical Chinese warlord, decisive and careless of decencies in gaining personal benefits, who repeatedly betrayed those with whom he was tied by the bonds of friendship and team work, a person, who must not be trusted', in sharp contrast to Karakhan's description of 'the most decent of all the warlords'.³⁹ Trifonov further reported how Soviet military instructors worked with individual soldiers, performed the duties of artillery mechanics, repaired weapons, and built armoured trains, solely providing, that is

³⁵ In total during April–August 1925, the Political Bureau of AUCP(b) made up their minds to send Feng 16,000 rifles and over 9,000,000 rounds of ammunition. See Protocols of the Sessions of Chinese Commission of Political Bureau of the Central Committee of AUCP(b): Protocol No. 1, Moscow, 17 April 1925; Protocol No. 2, Moscow, 29 May 1925; Protocol No. 8, Moscow, 29 August 1925, *AUCP(b)*, pp. 548, 567–68, 606.

³⁶ Protocol No. 2 of the Session of Chinese Commission of Political Bureau of the Central Committee of AUCP(b), Moscow, 29 May 1925, in *ibid.*, p. 566. F6107/2/10, Macleay to Chamberlain, Beijing, 28 October 1925, in Jarman (ed.), *China: Political Reports*, p. 254.

³⁷ F5728/5681/10, Weekly Summary of Events in China, 27 November 1925, in Jarman (ed.), *China: Political Reports*, p. 189.

³⁸ V.A. Trifonov was arrested on 21 June 1937 and sentenced to death by the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court of the USSR on 15 March 1938 for being a member of a Trotskyist subversive-saboteur organization. He was executed on the same day.

³⁹ 'Iz kitaiskogo arhiva Trifonova' [From Trifonov's Chinese archive] in *Problemy dalnego vostoka* [Far Eastern Affairs] No. 3 (Moscow: Problemy Dalnego Vostoka, 1990) pp. 110–23, p. 115; Karakhan to Chicherin, Beijing, 1 March 1925, *SCKD*, p. 462.

to say, service functions, because the Chinese excluded them from staff work, logistics, and operational command.⁴⁰ Relegated to a subordinate role, the Soviet officers could do little but teach, and, as Trifonov lamented, ‘with negligibly small exception’, they were ‘least of all suited for such occupation’. Soviet militarists had expected that the Chinese would allow the officers to participate in decision-making, which is why they selected men with civil war experience and little pedagogical fitness. ‘In Russia the majority of them wouldn’t get anywhere near a military academy,’ Trifonov noted. Worse, these instructors had to teach through bad interpreters, ‘which partly saved them from a totally shameful failure’. Trifonov mentions how some Soviet instructors were allowed into the Chinese army but only as a token of gratitude for Soviet material assistance, and as a ruse to minimize their effectiveness. Soviet instructors were ‘literally forced to beg for work’, resulting in a ‘shameful episode of our Chinese policy’.

The outbreak of warfare changed nothing: Chinese officers kept Soviet instructors in the dark or stationed them away from the frontlines where they were helpless.⁴¹ The Soviets’ lack of experience in dealing with warlords—in understanding their mentality and reluctance to learn from prior mistakes—forced the Japanese ambassador to remark that they were ‘learning by experience what wiser people have learned in times past, that to subsidize one individual or group in China is a poor investment: the recipients will willingly take all that is given, and, except for a wealth of promises, give nothing in return’. Indeed, running through Trifonov’s report is the idea that, ‘All Feng’s behaviour clearly demonstrates that he just wants to use our material aid without giving anything back in exchange, neither to us, nor to country’s national liberation movement’, and the bitter acknowledgement that, ‘The influence of our advisors and our soviet influence in general on Nationalist Army is negligibly small, and I am not even sure in the very existence of this negligibly small share of influence.’ It was a verdict on the whole Soviet policy in northeast China.⁴²

⁴⁰ The same was true about propaganda work. As Sheridan points out: ‘From the very beginning, Feng showed himself reluctant to permit . . . Russian political activity in his army. He gladly accepted Russian assistance, but when it came to anything that threatened to loosen his own tight control over his troops, the Russians found Feng frustratingly obdurate.’ Sheridan, *Chinese Warlord*, p. 165.

⁴¹ ‘Iz kitaiskogo arhiva Trifonova’, pp. 116, 121.

⁴² Cited in Lensen, *Damned Inheritance*, p. 90; Iz kitaiskogo arhiva Trifonova, pp. 116, 121.

Apart from propagating a belief among the participants that there was a conspiracy, Soviet involvement did little to help Feng in the war against Zhang. Indeed, Soviet officials expected that Feng would lose.⁴³ Mikhail Frunze, chairman of the Revolutionary Military Council and chief of the Red Army Staff, wrote: 'The present state of Feng's army cannot ensure him victory in case of war with Zhang Zuolin.' To plot a conspiracy and be 'the prime mover', Moscow had to know the plans of the would-be conspirators, but in fact it knew nothing about Feng's plans: 'It is not up to us to decide the time of armed conflict,' Karakhan wrote to Stalin at the beginning of May, and Soviet officials could only predict, with various degrees of inaccuracy, when hostilities would commence. Not only was Moscow's factual knowledge about Feng's plans limited, but it also had no plans of its own. At the end of October, Frunze stated that, 'Our officials do not know what to do, what measures to take in the context of the recent events in China. Two discussions with Karakhan showed that he also does not have any set ideas about what to do.' Given Frunze's rank, it is impossible to imagine that he would have been blind to the existence of a conspiracy.⁴⁴

Still, if the story of a grand Soviet conspiracy against Zhang involving Feng and Guo is invalid, then there must be another explanation for the defiant, even offensive, Soviet policy towards the Chinese Eastern Railway. Were Moscow's efforts to provoke a conflict with Zhang intentional, Moscow presumably would have thought through—in advance—the resulting consequences, including the possibilities for armed conflict, to which its provocative policy might well lead. Back in 1924, Moscow had indeed considered the possibility of the armed seizure of the Chinese Eastern Railway by the Red Army. For this purpose, the Central Committee put together a special commission under the chairmanship of Vladimir Antonov-Ovseyenko, head of the Political Directorate of the Revolutionary Military Council, who, on 25 October 1917, had led the Bolshevik assault to capture the

⁴³ Although the Soviet state at least had some influence over Feng Yuxiang, it had virtually no means by which to manipulate Guo Songling.

⁴⁴ Frunze's report on the politico-military situation in China submitted to Political Bureau of the Central Committee of AUCP(b), Moscow, 13 October 1925, *AUCP(b)*, p. 641; Karakhan to Stalin, Beijing, 4 May 1925, *SCKD*, p. 497; P.I. Smolentsev's letter of explanation regarding the plan for material support for the Nationalist Army and Canton, Moscow, 7 October 1925, *AUCP(b)*, p. 637; Extract from Frunze's letter attached to the Protocol No. 86 of the Session of Political Bureau of the Central Committee of AUCP(b), Moscow, 29 October 1925, *AUCP(b)*, p. 655.

Winter Palace and arrested the ministers of the Russian provisional government. The conclusion of the commission was categorical and explicit: 'The state of facts in the Far East . . . under no circumstances allows an aggressive policy towards China.'⁴⁵ Besides this, the Soviet Union would have had to probe the attitude of the Great Powers towards the possibility of military intervention by the Soviet Army which, in fact, it did—not as a provisional measure before conflict broke out but rather as a reaction to the accomplished fact: on 25 January, the British ambassador in Tokyo Sir Charles Eliot reported that the British military attaché had learned that the Soviets had made an inquiry through the Japanese military attaché in Moscow about the likely Japanese reaction to the dispatch of Soviet troops to North Manchuria, against which the Japanese General Staff had set its face.⁴⁶

If it was not the intention of Soviet authorities in Moscow to escalate tensions with Mukden authorities over the Railway, then what explains the Russians' provocative policy? Documentary evidence indicates that the fault lies mainly with Karakhan for his failure to keep Moscow informed of his decision-making. In his letters, Chicherin complained that the information Moscow received from Karakhan about the Railway's internal affairs, the conflicts swirling around it, and the policies of Chinese authorities towards it was insufficient: 'We sat down on the CER,' he huffed, 'and must know what is going on there and where are we heading.' Order number 94, issued by general-manager Ivanov, which dismissed employees who did not have either Chinese or Soviet citizenship and the scandal connected with it, came as a surprise to Moscow. Chicherin crustily remarked that there had been no mention in Karakhan's prior reports, although 'this affair has already been underway at that time'. 'We have absolutely no idea,' Chicherin wrote the next day to Karakhan, 'about a lot of your activities both on the CER and in China in general, and we learn about them only in case of conflicts which out of necessity become known to us. Such a state of our total detachment from your work is absolutely abnormal, because it totally disables us from aiding you in a timely way.'⁴⁷ Central authorities in Moscow became

⁴⁵ Usov, *Sovetskaya razvedka*, pp. 128–29.

⁴⁶ Lensen, *Damned Inheritance*, p. 86.

⁴⁷ Chicherin to Karakhan, Moscow, 25 November 1924, *SCKD*, p. 371; Chicherin to Karakhan, Moscow, 1 June 1925, *SCKD*, pp. 536–37; Chicherin to Karakhan, Moscow, 2 June 1925, *SCKD*, p. 538.

hostage to Karakhan's decisions. They could not remove Karakhan from his position nor revoke his decisions out of fear that Zhang would perceive such reversals as weakness, which might lead to further concessions. This explains why, even as they criticized him in their confidential correspondence Politburo members had little choice but to lend public support to Karakhan's policymaking, which gave the impression that Moscow sanctioned his actions. Chicherin admitted that in the conflict stemming from order number 94, Ivanov was wrong and had no right to issue such an order without consulting the board, since among those fired were individuals who according to the regulations could be appointed or dismissed only by the board. Chicherin also stressed that 'such important decisions should not be taken without the participation of Moscow'.⁴⁸ That Chicherin's message lied in asserting that 'the order of comrade Ivanov was . . . illegitimate' must have been obvious to Karakhan—it was of course Karakhan's not Ivanov's order that was illegitimate, for all decisions on the Railway required Karakhan's final approval.⁴⁹

Since Karakhan was the decision-maker and therefore the one who bore sole responsibility for the escalation of the Sino–Soviet conflict over the Railway, it is necessary to understand his motives. A plausible explanation is that he intentionally provoked a full-scale conflict that would necessitate the intervention of the Red Army and lead to Zhang's deposition. Personal attitudes often play a crucial role in history, and there is evidence to support such an interpretation. In the course of time, Karakhan's tone whenever he mentioned Zhang in his letters deteriorated from neutral to insulting. In May 1925, he called Zhang an 'old *honghuzi* [bandit]' and a 'primitive vulture' driven by 'rabid malice and hatred' against the Soviets.⁵⁰ Yet in spite of this personal animosity, Karakhan valued Zhang as a pawn—or rather as a knight—in his long-term strategy, particularly in the event that power in Beijing should fall into the Guomindang's hands. While

⁴⁸ Chicherin to Karakhan, Moscow, 1 June 1925, *SCKD*, p. 536.

⁴⁹ In the beginning of January 1925 Karakhan demanded that Stalin hand over responsibility for the Railway to him, because 'otherwise the mistakes will be made and precedents established, which will cost us dearly. Not a single direction concerning the CER should be given without consulting with me . . . Now I am watching every step [by the CER's administration] and instruct about everything, including the appointments on major posts because I know well the situation there.' Karakhan to Stalin, Beijing, 9 January 1925, *SCKD*, p. 420.

⁵⁰ Karakhan to Stalin, Beijing, 29 May 1925, *SCKD*, p. 525; Karakhan to Chicherin, Beijing, 29 May 1925, *SCKD*, p. 531.

Karakhan expected that what he called a ‘maximal program’ (the principal objective being Soviet dominance over Manchuria) would take time and inevitably ride on the swinging tide of military victories and defeats, he felt that such a prolonged, costly course was not ‘necessary for the proper protection of our interests in Manchuria’. He supposed, rather, that a friendly government in Beijing would be enough to tip Manchuria’s balance of power in favour of the Soviet Union, in which event Zhang would be a useful foil.⁵¹

These factors aside, Karakhan’s motive in escalating the conflict over the Railway stemmed from his attitude toward Zhang—to be more precise, in his misjudgement of the Old Marshal’s character—and this turned out to be a capital error. In one of his letters to Stalin, Karakhan shared his opinion that Zhang ‘respects only the fist, but we have never showed it to him’.⁵² The history of Sino–Soviet relations over the Chinese Eastern Railway from 1924 to the eruption of the 1926 conflict is a dialogue from a position of strength from the Soviet side, without any attempt at compromise, since Karakhan believed that this was the only effective strategy. In general manager Ivanov, Karakhan found a valuable and understandable ally. ‘Towards the Chinese,’ Karakhan was pleased to note, Ivanov ‘sticks to a tough posture; if I were not afraid to insult him I would rather say a “great power” [posture].’⁵³

The prohibition on transporting Chinese military forces on credit was just another of Karakhan’s attempts to put Zhang in his place. Although it was the last straw, and obviously infuriated the Old Marshal, who, bearing in mind the secret protocol attached to the Mukden Agreement, is likely to have interpreted the prohibition as an encroachment into his share of control over the Railway, it was coincidental to Guo’s rebellion. Had Karakhan sought to undermine Zhang at the rebellion’s crucial juncture, then he would hardly have issued the order on 10 November 1925, 12 days before Guo demanded Zhang’s resignation in favour of his son Zhang Xueliang and 17 days before hostilities broke out, nor would he have waited until 16 January 1926 to enforce it, almost a month after Guo’s death. Karakhan, who is unlikely to have known about the conclusions of the 1924 commission regarding the impermissibility of an aggressive policy towards China, allowed himself to believe that he could push Zhang to the brink for

⁵¹ Karakhan to Chicherin, Beijing, 29 May 1925, *SCKD*, p. 533.

⁵² Karakhan to Stalin, Beijing, 29 May 1925, *SCKD*, p. 525.

⁵³ Karakhan to Stalin, Beijing, 23 June 1925, *SCKD*, p. 551.

fear of Red Army intervention.⁵⁴ Karakhan was wrong. When Stalin recalled him from China and he was leaving Beijing, he would have been likely to see the same leaflets that Trifonov had seen: 'Down with the Japanese and Russian dogs!'⁵⁵ It was a sad reward for his efforts. Karakhan had sown the wind, and now the Soviet Union would have to face up to the consequences and reap the whirlwind.

The price of the mistake

The failure of Soviet policy in northeast China, of which the conflict over the Railway in 1925–26 was a case in point, was unsurprising. The struggle for power among the Soviet Union's leaders who advocated different approaches to foreign policy inevitably resulted in back-and-forth diplomacy.⁵⁶ Trifonov defined Soviet policy in China as 'spasmodic', where measures taken in one instance contradicted measures taken in another, resulting in a 'not so very small mess'.⁵⁷ Karakhan could have found no better way to alienate Zhang than by indicating his readiness to sell him arms and then openly shipping arms to his enemy, bluntly stating that, 'Everybody will know and make a noise about our support [of Feng]—this is inevitable. [An artillery] gun could be transported only by six camels. It will be impossible to hide this even from little children.' And, 'It is impossible to conceal the presence of our instructors as well as the conveyance of cargo along a tract 2,000 kilometres long.'⁵⁸ Zhang could only fume over

⁵⁴ Trifonov mentioned in his diary that Karakhan believed that Chinese people perceived Soviet assistance to Feng as assistance for the popular movement. If the Soviet Union were to be active in Manchuria during conflict between Zhang and Feng (to the extent of sending troops to the Chinese Eastern Railway), Chinese people would perceive it not as an 'imperialistic attempt of seizure' but as intervention on behalf of the popular movement. In 'Iz kitaiskogo arhiva Trifonova', p. 123.

⁵⁵ 'Iz kitaiskogo arhiva Trifonova', p. 117.

⁵⁶ Trotsky, for example, advocated a less aggressive policy towards China in general and recommended, in particular, 'that the CER railway administration had to be more responsive to its Chinese partners'. For more details, see Bruce A. Elleman (1997). *Diplomacy and Deception: The Secret History of Sino-Soviet Diplomatic Relations, 1917–1927* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe), p. 136.

⁵⁷ 'Iz kitaiskogo arhiva Trifonova', p. 118.

⁵⁸ Karakhan to Stalin, Beijing, 29 May 1925, *SCKD*, pp. 523–24; Karakhan to Chicherin, Beijing, 29 May 1925, *SCKD*, p. 529.

the Soviets' effort to supply weapons to his rival, a forced impotence that must have humiliated him.⁵⁹

Soviet diplomats like Karakhan lacked consistency, distinct plans, perception, and an understanding of Chinese traditions, mentality, culture, and language. 'It is necessary to remember,' Trifonov wrote in his diary, 'that we are working now in China without any knowledge of China, not knowing the language, having only three or four translators.' Karakhan also complained of a deficiency of translators, describing the situation as 'tragic', and stating that there was but a single translator for every ten officials.⁶⁰ Soviet propaganda also undermined Soviet prestige. The British consul Porter noted how attacks on the imperialistic policies of the Powers 'recoiled upon her own [Soviet] head' and 'the mere threat [of force] must have sufficed to undo the costly propaganda work of years and to have opened the eyes of all but the most venal Chinese officials to her real policy and objects'.⁶¹ Indeed, in the mid-1920s, Chinese scholar, journalist, and philosopher Liang Qichao argued:

Is the Soviet Union an imperialist? I have no hesitation in answering: it is the crystallized product of imperialism; it is the big devil of imperialism . . . The politics which the Russians play is always autocracy inside and aggression outside . . . O Soviet Russia! Do you want to say that you are not imperialistic? The day on which you stop your activities in China will be the day we believe you. But, is it really possible?⁶²

Chicherin mentioned that his office received numerous comments from different Chinese who had formerly fully supported Soviet policy. Now, they declared, 'the scales had fallen from their eyes', since the Soviet Union 'now manifested the imperialistic essence' of its policy.⁶³

⁵⁹ F2300/2/1, Palairret to Chamberlain, Beijing, 5 May, in Jarman (ed.), *China: Political Reports*, p. 241.

⁶⁰ 'Iz kitaiskogo arhiva Trifonova', p. 122; Letter of L.M.Karakhan to J.V. Stalin, Beijing, 17 July 1925, *SCKD*, p. 564.

⁶¹ Cited in Lensen, *Damned Inheritance*, p. 88–89.

⁶² Cited in Felix Patrikeeff (2002). *Russian Politics in Exile: The Northeast Asian Balance of Power, 1924–1931* (Houndmills, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan), p. 65.

⁶³ Chicherin to Karakhan, Moscow, 16 March 1926, *SCKD*, p. 610. Of course, such a 'fall of the scales from the eyes' did not stop certain Chinese political groups, like Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang. They went on using the Soviet Union and Soviet help as leverage in their own internal disputes, promising the Soviets much more than they delivered. Once they attained their objectives, they quickly broke with the Soviet Union. For more details, see Conrad Brandt (1958). *Stalin's Failure in China, 1924–1927* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press).

In his paper Elleman points out that ‘the Soviet Union’s propaganda in China was being used merely to expand Soviet power, not to support a new era of equality with China.’⁶⁴ It was not propaganda but rather ideology, I suggest, that was at odds with Soviet realpolitik. This problem of praxis upset even top Soviet officials like Chicherin, who sincerely believed that the origin of Soviet failures not only in China but also across the Orient was to be found in the inherent contradiction in Soviet ideology, its ‘historical essence’, and its de facto imperialistic methods. Chicherin argued that Ivanov’s—essentially Karakhan’s—policy of ‘ruthless resolution’ might have been logical and suitable were he a tsarist governor-general with an army of 100,000 soldiers at his back to protect him. ‘Tsarist policy had its internal harmony. Ours has not. In practice we follow the policy in spirit of tsarist satraps.’⁶⁵ Chicherin, unlike Karakhan, was free of illusions, and realized, along with other foreign diplomats, what the consequences would be if Zhang, after hearing of the threats to send in the Red Army, had not made concessions in order to garner Japanese support. Indeed, Japan’s prohibition on military action within ten kilometres of its South Manchuria Railway subsequent to Guo’s uprising saved the Old Marshal and sealed the fate of the rebellious general. British Foreign Office official F.T.A. Ashton-Gwatkin believed that in the event of Japanese support the Soviets had either to ‘act on their ultimatum or accept a humiliating defeat with [the] loss of much of their position on the Chinese Eastern Railway. The showing up of Russian intrigue, bluff and weakness is all to our advantage.’⁶⁶ Chicherin several times echoed Ashton-Gwatkin’s view:

Bringing in troops by us would have been a very serious blow to all our Chinese policymaking, and that would have been widely used by our enemies to compromise us . . .⁶⁷

If [Mukden] did not give way, we would have either totally discredited ourselves by not putting the threat into action, or got ourselves into an impossible adventure, spoiling all our oriental policy.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Elleman, ‘The Soviet Union’s Secret Diplomacy’, p. 480.

⁶⁵ *SCKD*, p. 611.

⁶⁶ Ashton-Gwatkin, cited in Lensen, *Damned Inheritance*, p. 86

⁶⁷ Letter of G.V. Chicherin to L.M. Karakhan, Moscow, 5 February 1926, *SCKD*, p. 599.

⁶⁸ Letter of G.V. Chicherin to L.M. Karakhan, Moscow, 16 March 1926, *SCKD*, p. 610.

The outcome of the conflict over the Railway came as a surprise to Karakhan. He neither expected the conflict nor knew what policy to pursue afterwards, demonstrating his rigidity and inability to adapt to quickly changing circumstances. He realized his own incompetence, which is why he reacted so bitterly and impatiently when asked to sum up the situation and share his plans for the future:

It is possible, but in very general terms. Do you want to have a well-drawn plan—blue, red, yellow little circles, each on its own place—and work on the basis of this plan, on these circles and only in their limits? It is impossible.⁶⁹

Events evidently changed Karakhan's view. He digested the lesson and admitted that the Soviet Union presently 'has not any operational plan in Manchuria and it waits to be worked out. We are weak and it is necessary to consider our military and international weakness.'⁷⁰ He came to share Chicherin's belief that Soviet policy in China was a losing battle when, through the Chinese Eastern Railway, Soviet officials demonstrated to the Chinese nation their 'imperialistic practice, methods of horriification, oppression, and disdain towards [the] Chinese'. More than likely, Karakhan, as with Chicherin, had appreciated the harmfulness of an iron-handed policy and his 'general manager's monarchy', which turned out 'in the long run to be an irresponsible imperialistic policy'.⁷¹

Yet the damage inflicted by these mistakes was irreparable. As British consul Porter observed, the Chinese were the beneficiaries of the conflict, for:

... they have made their point, namely, that they will not pay cash to the railway for military transportation, and they have shown that they have the power and the will to arrest and imprison the nominees of the Soviet Government and to take repressive measures against the supposedly all-powerful Bolshevik institutions.⁷²

The Soviet policy on the Chinese Eastern Railway and in northeastern China in general created in Zhang a powerful enemy, and his son Zhang Xueliang shared his father's loathing. When

⁶⁹ Karakhan's speech at the session of the commission Political Bureau of Central Committee of AUCP(b), Beijing, 11 February 1926, in M. Leutner and M.L. Titarenko (eds) (1996). *VKP(b), Komintern i natsionalno-revoliutsionnoe dvizhenie v Kitae: dokumenty t. 2 (Ch. 1) 1926-1927* [AUCP(b), Comintern and national-revolutionary movement in China: Documents, Vol. 2, (Part. 1) 1926-27] (Moscow: Buklet), p. 71.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 74-75.

⁷¹ Chicherin to Karakhan, Moscow, 16 March 1926, *SCKD*, p. 611.

⁷² Cited in Lensen, *Damned Inheritance*, p. 88.

Zhang Xueliang assumed power in Manchuria in 1928, the pendulum swung his way. His harassment of Soviet officials and Chinese Eastern Railway employees allowed the Chinese to believe that they could take repressive measures against the citizens and institutions of the mighty Soviet Union without adverse repercussions, an attitude that led to the Sino–Soviet military conflict of 1929, which in turn exacerbated Japanese alarm over the rising strength of the Soviets in the region and their invasion of Manchuria in September 1931.⁷³

⁷³ Patrikeeff, *Russian Politics in Exile*, p. 28.