Nonfiction review: 'Unbound' by Dean King

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Surrounded by the Nationalist Army of Chiang Kai-shek, 86,000 soldiers of the Red Army retreated from Jiangxi province in October 1934, traversing some of China's most difficult terrain. Four thousand miles and 370 days later, they arrived in Shaanxi. Although nine out of every 10 members of the original group had died or been left behind, "the Long March" allowed the Communists to regroup and fight another day.

Thirty of the Long Marchers were females, and in "Unbound: A True Story of War, Love, and Survival," journalist Dean King provides an often riveting account of their journey through snowy mountains and high-altitude swamps. As he showers valentines on the courageous and compassionate cadre of communist women, King suggests, a bit hyperbolically, that "the limited feminist revolution" implemented the Red Army, which redistributed land, giving men and women equal shares, helped secure the loyalty of millions of peasants.

"Unbound" is at its best, however, when it's simply a suspenseful story of suffering and surviving. With few chances to wash their faces, let alone bathe or change their clothes, King writes, the women fought a losing battle against lice infestation. To satiate their hunger, they ate whatever they could kill, including rats, and served themselves "mental meals," lavishly describing favorite hometown dishes as they walked along the trail. Worst of all, King reveals, despite army regulations against sexual activity, several Long March women gave birth -- and had to abandon their babies, hoping against hope that someone would discover and care for them.

Hailed as the architect of the Long March, Mao Zedong used it to consolidate his grip on power in the Communist Party. He chose a large number -- 7,750 miles -- to capture the epic nature of the journey and proclaimed that it had seeded revolution among the 200 million people living in the provinces through which the Red Army passed.

But such was Mao's paranoia that decades later, his Cultural Revolution turned on the establishment in China. Many women of the Long March, who had risen to positions of prominence, were, King reports, harassed by youth gangs, persecuted, prosecuted and imprisoned.

After Mao's death in 1976, the wheel of fortune turned again: Most of the "women were rehabilitated, some posthumously." Shockingly, perhaps, the survivors remained devoted not only to one another but to the Communist Party, "bound to it," King concludes, "by the great, bitter Long March, when so much had been sacrificed for a shining future."

UNBOUND
Dean King
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$25.99, 399 pages

--Glenn C. Altschuler
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