Essential Histories

The Chinese Civil War 1945–49

OSPREY PUBLISHING

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Michael Lynch

Dedication

For Tom Lynch, born 2008

Editor's note:

The following abbreviations are used throughout the text:
CCP – Chinese Communist Party (the Reds)
GMD – Guomindang (the Nationalists)
NRA – Nationalist Revolutionary Army (renamed the Republic of China Army in 1946)
PLA – People's Liberation Army (originally the Red Army)
PRC – People's Republic of China (Communist China)

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Introduction

The Chinese Civil War of 1946–49, one of the bloodiest conflicts of the twentieth century, took the lives of six million soldiers and civilians. It was not a new struggle but the latest stage in a conflict that went back two decades. It was fought between two parties, the Guomindang (GMD or Nationalists) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP or Reds), both of whom claimed sovereignty over the land and people of the whole of China.

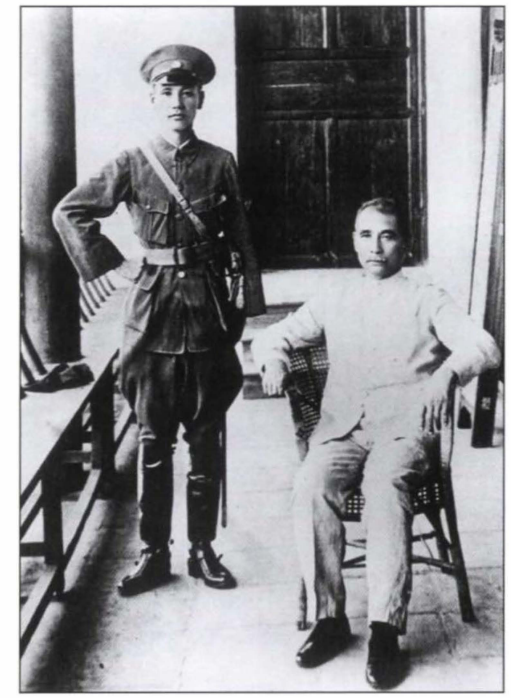
The disposition of the two sides when their war was renewed in 1946 had been determined a year earlier by the outcome of World War II in the East. The Japanese surrender in August 1945 had marked a pinnacle of success for Chiang Kai-shek, the leader of the GMD, which had governed the Republic of China since 1936. He now emerged from the Pacific War as a world statesman. Yet, welcome as victory was for Chiang, the manner in which it had come about was tinged with disappointment for him.

His hope had been that the defeat of the Japanese would also see the defeat of the Chinese Communists, who, under their leader, Mao Zedong, aimed ultimately to take power from the GMD. Chiang had expected that the final stages of the war against Japan would climax with a massive landing of American troops on the Chinese mainland, who would eventually overwhelm the Japanese. In the process they would drive the Communists from their bases in northern China, leaving Chiang and the Nationalists as the undisputed masters of the nation.

But it did not work out as Chiang Kai-shek had planned. The Pacific conflict ended not with the crushing of the Japanese forces in a bloody, attritional conflict in China, but with the atomic bombing of Japan itself. It was the nuclear devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 that persuaded the Japanese to surrender unconditionally. This sudden and dramatic close to the war meant the cancellation of the plans for the large-scale movement of American forces to China, and thus undermined Chiang Kai-shek's internal strategy.

Nor was it merely that the Communists remained undefeated. The abrupt ending of the war directly enhanced their position. The Japanese commanders in China chose to make their formal surrenders to the nearest Chinese military authority. Since in a

Sun Yatsen (seated) and Chiang Kai-shek (standing) in 1925. Sun was China's first great modern revolutionary, whose 'Three People's Principles' – nationalism, socialism and democracy – proved an inspiration to both Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Zedong. At his death in 1925, Sun was succeeded as leader of the Nationalists by Chiang Kai-shek. (akg-images)



number of areas this meant the local Communist commander, the CCP found themselves being treated as the proper representatives of the Republic of China. Chiang appealed to his US ally to rush his troops to positions where they could take the local Japanese surrenders. The Americans responded by organizing a major airlift to the northern areas, but it proved only partially successful. The Communists were strong enough to continue asserting their authority over the 'liberated areas' – their term for those parts of China that they had controlled or taken since the 1930s.

Chiang's problems did not end there. A further restriction on the Nationalists' supremacy was the presence in Manchuria, China's most northerly region, of a large Soviet army. In keeping with a long-term promise made at the Yalta Conference in February 1945, the USSR had joined the war against Japan three days after the Hiroshima bombing. On the pretext of freeing Manchuria from Japanese control, the Soviet forces had taken over the region for their own ends. They were to stay there until March 1946, leaving only after they had stripped the region of over $2 billion worth of plant and machinery.

Chiang Kai-shek, however, had little ground for formal complaint. Only days after the Soviet troops crossed into Manchuria, his Nationalist government had signed a Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, which accepted the USSR's right to enter China. Chiang's willingness to make this concession was explained by his political aim. He was prepared to allow Soviet forces into Manchuria on the understanding that the USSR confirmed its recognition of his party as the only legitimate authority in China. Chiang also calculated that the Soviet forces might well be able to achieve what he had originally hoped the Americans would do – destroy the Communists.

The reason why this was a realistic expectation on Chiang's part was that Joseph Stalin, the Soviet leader, was far from being wholly supportive of the Chinese

Troops of the Chinese Nationalist 82nd Division fight the Japanese at Kuan Lung-po, 1944. (Cody Images)

The Nationalist army enters Kweilin, June 1945. Within months of the Japanese surrender in August, Chiang's forces would be fighting the Communists. At the renewal of the civil war, the Nationalist armies were both far more numerous and better equipped. (Cody Images)

Communists. From the time of the CCP's formation in the 1920s, Stalin had consistently judged that it was not strong enough to survive in China. Moreover, he did not want an outright Communist victory in China. As late as 1949, Stalin was urging Mao to accept a compromise peace with the Nationalists. His motives were national and personal as well as political. He was unhappy at the prospect of a strong China on the USSR's Asian borders and feared that if Mao were to become the all-powerful leader of China this would make him a formidable international rival.

It was also the case that the USA was initially far from antagonistic towards the Chinese Communists. It had seen them as vital allies in the struggle against Japan. So it was with the best of intentions that the Americans sought to lessen the strife in post-war China by bringing the CCP and the GMD together in a compromise settlement. It was under American auspices that in August 1945 Chiang and Mao Zedong met personally for the first time in 20 years. The two leaders agreed on a truce, but it is doubtful whether either of them intended it to last. The differences between them ran too deep. It was no surprise, therefore, that within a few months such agreement as had been reached had broken down. Formally, negotiations still continued, but by June 1946 the two sides were openly fighting each other again. The Americans – who had previously not fully grasped the depth of the GMD–CCP animosity – abandoned their role as mediators and by January 1947 had withdrawn from China, although they continued to provide the GMD with military advisers and equipment.

The war was often a complex affair at local level. The lines between Communists and Nationalists were often blurred by the interplay of local activists. In some areas villages formed armed units to protect themselves against the forces of both sides. To increase their security, these

self-protection units often did deals with local bandits and marauders. In some areas resistance groups, which had first been formed to fight the Japanese, did not disband after Japan's surrender but stayed together as a local army. Unsophisticated peasants did not find it easy to distinguish between Nationalists, Communists, and

A CCP propaganda poster celebrates Mao's taking of the salute in Tiananmen Square after his announcement of the creation of the People's Republic of China in October 1949. The slogans, in traditional Chinese characters, applaud the co-operation of the CCP, the PLA and the people in the victory of Chinese Communism. (The Granger Collection/TopFoto)

armed marauders. In their experience, the soldiers – whatever their uniform or allegiance – were equally likely to steal from, beat, rape or murder them. It is important to acknowledge that the peasantry seldom had a strong sense of China as a nation that was directly relevant to them. The peasant's experience was local; he lived his life locally, and it was that locality that defined his opportunities. Indeed, it was this very localism that Mao and Chiang in their different ways were trying to break down and replace with a sense of identity on a national scale.

The Nationalists, after some seemingly impressive successes in the first year of the war, when they attempted to drive the Communists from their northern bases, were unable to achieve a single major victory between 1947 and 1949. By 1949 their grip on northern, central and southern China had been broken in a series of victorious People's Liberation Army (PLA) campaigns. In October 1949, in the restored capital, Beijing, Mao Zedong claimed that a new nation had been created, the People's Republic of China (PRC), in which the CCP was the sovereign power. Knowing that the position was irrecoverable, Chiang, to avoid having to surrender, abandoned the mainland. In December he fled with the remnants of his forces to the island of Taiwan. There he established a separate Nationalist state, which, in defiance of the Communists, claimed to be the legitimate government of the whole of China.

There is a sense in which the Chinese Civil War has not ended; no formal peace treaty or agreement has ever been made. The conflict that began in the era of the Cold War has outlived that larger struggle. The two Chinese states that emerged from the civil war, the PRC and Taiwan, have followed very different paths in their subsequent development, but each side continues to claim that it alone is the legitimate government of all China. At the start of the second decade of the twenty-first century, the issues over which the civil war had been fought 60 years earlier have still to be resolved.

Chronology

1945 **4–11 February** Yalta Conference
6 and 9 August Atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki
14 August Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship
28 August Mao flies with Hurley to Chongqing for start of CCP–GMD talks, meets Chiang for the first time in 20 years
2 September Formal Japanese surrender
11 October Mao returns to Yanan from Chongqing
21 December Start of Marshall mission to China

1946 **March** Soviet forces leave Manchuria
May Communists take Harbin
June 10 Short-lived ceasefire in Manchuria
26 June Civil war starts
December Start of NRA counter-attacks

1947 **7 January** End of Marshall mission
January–March NRA takes over 150 towns
28 February Demonstrations in Taiwan against GMD takeover
March NRA repulsed by Lin Biao's forces at Harbin
19 March Nationalists take Yanan
May–December Unsuccessful NRA 'strongpoint offensive'
7 August Chiang visits Yanan

1948 **May** Mao establishes his military HQ at Xibaipo in Hebei province
12 September Start of Liaoshen campaign
15 October GMD surrenders Jinzhou
20–28 October Battle of Liaoxi
26 October Changchun surrenders to PLA
2 November Fall of Shenyang to PLA
6 November Start of Huaihai campaign
12 November Liaoshen campaign ends in NRA defeat
22 November NRA 7th Army capitulates at Zhanzhuan
29 November Start of Pingjin campaign
22 December Fall of Xinbaoan to PLA
23 December PLA takes Zhangjiakou

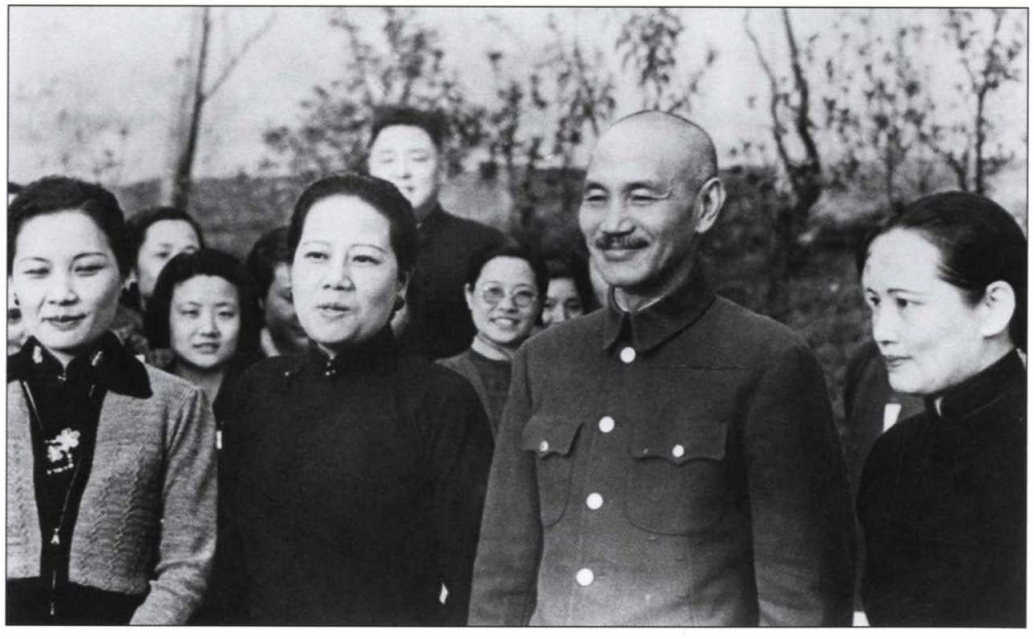
1949 **10 January** Xuzhou falls to PLA; Huaihai campaign ends in NRA defeat
15 January Fall of Tianjin to PLA
16 January Beijing surrenders to PLA without a fight
21 January Chiang Kai-shek passes presidency of GMD to Li Zongren
31 January Triumphal entry of PLA into Beijing; end of Pingjin campaign
20 April PLA crosses the Yangzi
20 April British ship HMS *Amethyst* fired on in Yangzi
23 April Fall of Nanjing to PLA
20 May NRA surrenders Xian
24 May Fall of Shanghai to PLA
July HMS *Amethyst* sails down Yangzi to safety
22 August NRA surrenders Changsha to PLA
10 September Mao takes up residence in Beijing
1 October Mao proclaims creation of PRC
28 October Ghangzhou falls to PLA
1 December Fall of Chongqing to PLA
10 December Chiang Kai-shek's flight to Taiwan. He leaves mainland China for the last time

A well-provisioned PLA unit advances towards Changchun. As the war developed, the PLA were generally much more successful that the NRA in organizing and maintaining their supply lines, due partly to the greater co-operation they received from local peoples. (Cody Images)

Nationalists and Communists

The Guomindang had come into being in the first decade of the twentieth century with the aim of modernizing China. Under its founder, Sun Yatsen, the GMD had advanced a revolutionary programme whose first objective was the bringing down of the ruling Qing dynasty. Yet, despite its contribution to the Chinese Revolution of 1911, which brought an end to the Qing, the GMD did not control the Chinese Republic that was then established. Central authority remained weak and the Nationalists, whose power base was in the south of China, were unable to control affairs. Government was carried on by President Yuan Shikai, a reactionary general of the old imperial army. By the time of his death in 1916, China was in a worse state than it had been in under the Qing. Near bankrupt, it had to rely heavily on a foreign financial consortium led by Japan, its neighbour and traditional enemy.

China's weakness in relation to Japan was further exposed in the aftermath of World War I. In the hope that by contributing to the Western Allies' war effort it would gain recognition of its rights, China had declared war on Germany in 1917. However, in the Versailles peace settlement of 1919, Chinese claims were simply ignored. Having had its soldiers disdainfully treated during the war as mere 'coolies', fit only for back-breaking labour behind the lines, China was brusquely informed at Versailles that it would not have its territories restored; the Chinese provinces formerly occupied by Germany were to be transferred to Japan. The news from Versailles created ferment in China.



Chiang's wife, Soong Meiling (far left), and her sisters Ailing (far right) and Qingling (centre). The Soong sisters were Nationalist celebrities whom Chiang valued as providing highly useful photo opportunities to project a more appealing image of the GMD and to promote female enlistment in the NRA. (© Bettmann/Corbis)

This Communist poster, dating from the 1920s, continued to be used during the civil war, which was a propaganda struggle as well as a military conflict. It urges peasants, workers, and soldiers to fight China's enemies – the imperialists and the warlords. After 1945, the list also included Chiang's Nationalists. (Library of Congress)

Outraged students took to the streets in protest against the humiliation of their nation and the failure of the Republican government to resist. Their actions were the beginning of a sustained reaction, known from its starting date as the May Fourth Movement. Inspired by an intense nationalism, the movement called on all Chinese to restore their nation's former independence and greatness by ridding China of foreign domination.

It was in the atmosphere created by May Fourth that a new radical party was born. In Shanghai in 1921, the Chinese Communist Party came into being. One of the CCP's founder members was Mao Zedong, a 28-year-old peasant from Hunan province. What had turned Mao into a Marxist was not abstract theory. He had been a revolutionary before he was a Marxist. Angered by the failure of the Republic to fulfil the hopes placed in it, and ashamed of his people's continuing subjection to foreign control, he had been searching for a political path that China could follow to achieve its freedom. Influenced by the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, which he saw as the overthrow of imperialism by the Russian people, he believed that Marxism provided the programme he had been seeking.

The Comintern, the Soviet agency for developing international revolution, had been involved in the formation of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921. It tried thereafter to direct the CCP's policy. Mao, however, never allowed himself to be overawed by the USSR, despite its claim as senior partner to be entitled to instruct the Chinese in revolutionary strategy. His successful resistance to Soviet encroachment was most evident in his victories in the 1920s and 1930s over a series of party rivals whom the Soviet Union tried to impose on the CCP.

It was because all Chinese revolutionaries shared the same basic ambition as Sun Yatsen's Nationalists – the defeat of China's external and internal enemies – that the CCP and GMD, in the early stages, were not rivals but partners. Indeed, many revolutionaries, including Mao, belonged to both. The fellow-feeling between the parties was stimulated by their joint wish to destroy the warlords – the term for those military leaders who, since 1912, had seized upon the weakness of the central Republican government to set themselves up as independent rulers in China's provinces. It was in order to crush the warlords that the GMD and the CCP formed a United Front in 1924. Over the next three years their combined armies proved increasingly successful and by 1927 the warlords had been largely overcome.

That year was critical in China's political development. It was in 1927 that Chiang Kai-shek, judging that the United Front had served its purpose in breaking the warlords, turned on his Communist allies in an attempt to annihilate them. Chiang's violent move, the White Terror, was a product of his

Chiang Kai-shek's German adviser, Hans von Seeckt (foreground) with fellow German officers in 1925. Seeckt helped create the basis for a modern Nationalist army and air force. Had his encirclement strategy been consistently followed in the 1930s, it is arguable that Mao and the CCP would have been totally destroyed. (Bundesarchiv Bild 146-2005-0163)

hatred of Communism. Since fighting his way to the leadership of the GMD in the power struggle that followed the death of Sun Yatsen in 1925, his primary concern had been to crush his internal enemies – the Communists. Chiang had gone to the USSR in the early 1920s to be trained as a revolutionary, but his experience there, rather than drawing him to Communism, did the opposite. He returned to China with an abiding detestation of Marxism, which became the motif of his political career. It remained his conviction that China could not progress towards true modernity unless it first destroyed Mao's Communists.

Therefore, over the next ten years Chiang devoted himself to hunting the CCP to extinction. He very nearly succeeded. In a series of encirclement campaigns, he tightened the ring around the Communist bases in southern China. Chiang's chief military adviser in these campaigns was a German general, Hans von Seeckt, whose presence in China between 1934 and 1935, as part of a German military mission, was evidence of the close links between the Nationalists and Hitler's Third Reich. It was Seeckt who drew up plans for reforming Chiang's army into 60 highly trained divisions. Although only a third of these had been created by the time of the Japanese invasion in 1937, Seeckt's influence had been an important one. The Nationalists' tactics, discipline and uniforms were all based on German models and it was Nazi Germany that, until 1936, supplied most of the GMD's weaponry.

By 1934, such was the build-up of pressure on the Communists' main base in Jiangxi in southern China that it was only by a desperate flight that Mao's Communists survived. It was their escape from Jiangxi to Yanan, in the northern province of Shaanxi, that became enshrined in Communist legend as the Long March of 1934–35. This was portrayed as a 6,000-mile odyssey, whose survivors, having come through the most

extreme of hazards, had been forged into an irresistible historical force, one destined to rule China. Much of this was hyperbole, and in fact the march had begun as a rout. Yet there was no denying that the CCP had successfully defied the Nationalists. Chiang would continue to attack the Communists, but events were to show that his last opportunity to destroy them had passed.

One of the most significant outcomes of the Long March was the consolidation of Mao's position as leader of the CCP. Once established in Yanan in 1935, Mao set about constructing a Communist soviet that over the next decade came to rival Chiang's Nationalist government. That Mao was able to do so was largely explained by a factor that dominated Chinese politics until 1945 – the occupation of China by Japan. In 1931, as a first step towards a massive expansion into Asia, Japan had occupied the northern region of Manchuria, renamed it Manchuguo and installed a puppet regime there. From this base the Japanese forces began to spread out into neighbouring regions.

Dedicated defender of his nation though he was, Chiang Kai-shek seemed slow to respond to the Japanese action; his primary aim was still to crush the Communists. The CCP made capital out of this by asserting that they, not the Nationalists, were the true champions of China. But a dramatic development in 1936 enabled them to seize the initiative. One of Chiang's own generals, unhappy with his leader's apparent lack of zeal in resisting the Japanese, led a mutiny that resulted in Chiang being taken prisoner at Xian. He was then handed over to the Communists, who, instead of killing him as he at first expected, offered him a deal. In return for his calling off the campaigns against them, they were prepared not merely to release him but to work under his military leadership in a renewal of the GMD–CCP alliance, this time directed against the Japanese. Chiang's predicament gave him no choice but to accept the terms offered. The curious result of this Xian Incident was, therefore, that in December 1936 he became recognized as the leader of the nation by the Communists he had been trying to destroy.

The clemency shown by the CCP towards Chiang was not sympathy but cold calculation. In exchange for sparing him, they had obtained recognition of their own

The beheading of a suspected Communist in Shanghai during the White Terror, launched by Chiang Kai-shek in 1927. (Cody Images)

Chiang Kai-shek with Roosevelt, Churchill and Madam Chiang in 1943, at the Cairo conference of Allied leaders. By the end of the Pacific War, Chiang was at the high point of his renown as China's leader. Although he would never be as powerful again, he had already helped to lay the basis for China to become a modern state. (TopFoto)

legitimacy. None of this, however, heralded any real understanding between the two parties. Their animosity remained. What tended to hide the true situation was the threat of Japan. Having established itself in Manchuria, Japan launched a full-scale invasion of China itself in 1937. Over the next eight years it occupied a third of the Chinese mainland, including China's most prosperous central states. One consequence of the occupation was that it ended the co-operation between Chiang and Nazi Germany. Hitler's growing friendship with Japan meant that the Nationalists could no longer call on German assistance in their struggle against the Japanese occupiers.

The post-Xian co-operation between the CCP and the Nationalists was always a strained affair and by 1940 fighting between them had broken out again. Thus between 1940 and 1945 there were two wars going on in China: the national war of resistance against the Japanese and the continuing CCP–GMD civil war. To this could be added a third struggle – both Mao and Chiang were involved in asserting their authority within their own parties. Mao faced a number of leadership challenges during the Yanan period from 1935 to 1945, but none of these seriously threatened his dominance. Using the most ruthless means to crush internal opposition, he was by the early 1940s the undoubted master of the CCP. Chiang Kai-shek was never entirely master of his party in the way that Mao was of his. Nevertheless, Chiang's reputation soared once World War II spread to the Asian theatres. The Japanese attack on the American base at Pearl Harbor in December 1941 brought the USA into the war as an ally of China and elevated Chiang to the status of international statesman.

Yet not all the advantages were with the Nationalists. As enemies of Japan, the

Even while the war against the Japanese was going on, Chiang Kai-shek continued to plan the destruction of his internal enemies, the Communists. In this propaganda poster from 1942, a traditional Chinese hero is shown grappling with and eventually putting to death the devil of Communism. (Library of Congress)

A local Japanese commander formally handing over a signed declaration of surrender to a GMD representative in August 1945. Depending on the location, Japanese commanders were just as likely to surrender to the Communists. (Philip Jowett)

Chinese Communists were also the USA's allies. In time of war, the ideological differences between the capitalist Americans and Mao's Marxists took second place to the common aim of defeating the Japanese. Mao wanted help from the Soviet Union in his struggle with the Nationalists, but he was also aware that the USA was not necessarily hostile to him and his party. That was why in his dealings with the Americans he played down his hardline Marxism and projected the idea that the Chinese Communists were essentially land reformers intent on improving the conditions of China's rural poor. At the end of the war the Americans were assured by Stalin that the CCP were merely 'margarine' Communists and that the Soviet Union had no binding links with them. This encouraged the USA to believe that it could establish democracy in China by bringing the two sides together without interference from the USSR.

It was this conviction that inspired a series of American missions to China in the last year of the Pacific War. Both Chiang and Mao were willing to play along with this, since both wanted continued US diplomatic recognition and material supplies. Some American advisers, taken in by the accommodating manner adopted by the Chinese Communists, even appealed to the State Department to abandon Chiang and give their full support to Mao. The USA later admitted that it 'lost' China during this period. Despite its undoubted goodwill and good faith, it had misunderstood the nature of internal politics in China. In the brief period after the end of the war in 1945, before their relations hardened into a Cold War, there was a possibility that the Soviet Union and the USA might have reached an accommodation over China. But, as their behaviour during the years of the Chinese Civil War was to show, neither of the two great powers had fully grasped the reality of the situation.

As they stood in 1945 at the end of the Japanese war, Chiang's Nationalists seemed to hold the advantage. Better armed, possessing far larger armies and in control of the key

strategic areas of China, the Nationalists looked set to triumph over the CCP. The Chinese Communists were restricted to bases in rural areas of northern China, and they had yet to make any real impact on the towns and cities. Yet though this was a limitation, it was not as great a one as it first appeared. The Chinese were overwhelmingly a rural people; 90 per cent of the population were peasants, most of whom eked out a miserable life at subsistence level. Both the Communist and Nationalist armies that faced each other were peasant armies, recruited mainly through coercion. This was particularly the case with the Nationalists, whose forces were largely conscripts. While not all the Communist troops were eager volunteers, a far higher proportion of the PLA's soldiers had enlisted willingly. The civil war was to be a test of which side would prove more adept at turning its peasant forces into effective fighting men.

The NRA, 1945–49

In 1945 Chiang's Nationalist Revolutionary Army (NRA) was composed of around three million pressed and recruited troops. These were formed into 160 separate armies each made up of three divisions, with a division varying between 5,000 and 10,000 troops. The divisions were sub-divided into brigades, regiments, battalions, companies and platoons. The army was never as organized as these bald figures might suggest. Indeed, it was lack of organization, especially in regard to the maintenance of essential ammunition and food, that was a constant problem for the NRA.

Chiang's military objective was to be head of an integrated national army that would respond to his every order. It was an aim he never fully achieved. Throughout the civil war his armies were a mixed bunch. There were crack units that were devoted to him personally, but too often his forces were a ragbag collection of units, committed only to their region and unwilling to take risks. Chiang's power to control them was always limited by the degree to which the local commanders were loyal to him. He was engaged in a continual effort to placate and persuade his army leaders, and his authority was always dependent upon deals being struck with local leaders. Chiang was seldom the master of the situation.

The officers in the NRA were of two main types. There were the fully trained men who had graduated from Nationalist military schools, such as Chiang's own elite Whampoa academy, sited in Nanjing and Chengdu. Many of these had seen service during the Japanese war and had experience and ability. However, these were outnumbered by the second type: locally recruited officers who used bribes or influence to gain commissions, which they saw as a source of income. The commands they most coveted were those concerned with handling supplies and resources. Corruption became endemic among such officers, few of whom had relevant military training or experience. The hunger and brutality experienced by the

NRA troops with their German-style helmets. Rank-and-file Nationalist soldiers were often well uniformed, but their deepest grievance was that food rations were frequently denied them by their officers, who sold the supplies to civilian dealers. Too often, troops existed on handfuls of rice which they carried compressed in their pockets.

Nationalist China and the Communist bases in 1946

rank-and-file recruits was often a consequence of their being at the mercy of this type of officer. Given the venality and the self-serving character of these officers, it followed that they were very poor fighters. They avoided contact with the enemy whenever possible and if engaged in battle were the first to surrender or defect when the going got tough.

Chiang's greatest problem in maintaining his armies as efficient fighting units was the high level of desertions. This had been a difficulty throughout Chinese military history. China was a vast country and the great majority of the population lived restricted lives. Life was local. Troops dreaded moving far away from their homes. When campaigns were long or took place in distant regions, peasant soldiers invariably grew homesick. The problem was made worse by the fact that the majority of the NRA's troops were conscripts, pressed into service by ferocious recruiting squads who raided villages and dragged off the menfolk.

Although the punishments for desertion were ferocious, many still attempted it and the result was that Nationalist units were often decimated. It was not uncommon for NRA units to lose as much as one-tenth of their troop numbers per month through desertion. To prevent this, NRA officers resorted to roping their men together in groups of a dozen or so. Sometimes chains were used on those thought most likely to abscond. Units even marched tied together, giving the appearance of prisoners rather than soldiers. Troops were allowed to relieve themselves only at prescribed times and it had to be done collectively. At night or at rest, the bonds remained on.

The NRA became notorious for the brutal way it treated its ordinary soldiers. Forty per cent of conscripts deserted during basic training and another 20 per cent died from starvation. The International Red Cross calculated that in the periods of the Japanese and civil wars from 1937 to 1949 over 15 million of those drafted into the Nationalist armies died. A system of individual responsibility was imposed, which required that each soldier kept watch over the next man behind or in front of him in the line; should he fail to stop that man

Hu Zongnan's troops in training. Hu was suspected of betraying the Nationalists over Yanan, when leaked information allowed Mao to escape ahead of Hu's advancing NRA forces, but his subsequent loyalty to Chiang suggested the rumours about him were false. Nevertheless, it remained a constant problem for Chiang that many in the NRA high command were guilty of betrayal and defection. (Philip Jowett)

from making off, he was punished by beatings and denial of rations. In general it was shortage of food that caused the greatest suffering among the troops. Men in the ranks were constantly hungry. This was not necessarily because food supplies to the army broke down, though this did happen; rather, the prime cause was the common practice among the officers of making money by selling army rations to crooked civilian rice or grain merchants. Troops were often reduced to surviving off compressed rice cakes, which they carried in their pockets and nibbled over a number of days.

Unsurprisingly, Nationalist morale declined. Feelings of homesickness and disorientation, an ever-present condition among peasant soldiers when campaigning far from their homes, gnawed at the Nationalist armies. A report in May 1947 from a high-ranking American diplomat in Shenyang contrasted the 'fighting spirit of the Communists with the exhaustion of the Nationalists and their growing indignation over disparity between officers' enrichment and soldiers' low pay, life, and their lack of interest in fighting far from home'.

When men are treated violently they behave violently. What added to the brutality that conditioned army life was that the NRA ranks were also swollen by troops from the former warlord armies. These soldiers had invariably taken part in or witnessed the myriad and fearsome crimes associated with the unfettered use of warlord authority. Looting, rape, torture, execution and the burning of villages were the usual – not the exceptional – behaviour of such forces. The violence may not have been as systematically organized as that perpetrated by the Japanese occupiers, but it was something to which many areas of China had become habituated by the 1940s. The terror in Sichuan province was

Nationalist conscripts roped together. The practice of conscription, which had begun during the anti-Japanese struggle, continued throughout the civil war, and was a major reason for the Nationalists' unpopularity. In 1947, Chiang's government issued a General Mobilization decree giving it unrestricted authority to conscript. (Library of Congress)

described by one observer: 'The poor people suffer the scourge of militarism, more destructive than floods, more destructive than savage beasts. We must have soldiers, people say, so that the country will be strong. And the people become poorer and poorer! Where an army has passed, nothing grows but brambles.'

Despite the problems surrounding recruitment, the NRA's three million troops at the start of the war outnumbered the PLA by over three to one. This, and the wider range of territory they occupied, seemed to indicate that the Nationalists had a powerful advantage over the Communists. But appearances were misleading. Chiang's forces were too thinly spread for an effective supply system to be maintained. There was also the accompanying problem that the further from the command centre the forces were, the more difficult they were to control.

Chiang enjoyed very committed support from his general staff at headquarters. Indeed, his top commanders venerated him and rejoiced in regarding him as the 'Generalissimo'. But the drawback of this was that they tended to vie with each other for his favour. This limited their independence and speed of action, since they waited upon his word rather than using their initiative when making decisions. Moreover, in competing for his approval they necessarily made it more difficult to co-operate among themselves. This was especially notable in their struggle for supplies. Individual generals would approach Chiang claiming that their particular needs gave them priority in the allocation of supplies and reserves. If he accepted their case, he would authorize their call for resources.

In order for a general to get his way, he needed to be able to approach Chiang directly. If the Generalissimo backed the idea put to him, it carried an authority that was then difficult for other military leaders to challenge. This, however, worked only at the top level. Lower down the chain of command, there was no guarantee that central directives would be obeyed if they ran counter to the interests of local commanders. Chiang often fumed over the manner in which strategic decisions made centrally were not followed in the field.

The PLA

There was a sense in which warlordism returned to China after the defeat of Japan. Contradicting Chiang's assertion that the Nationalist government was back in control, bandit gangs roamed many parts of the countryside. Owing allegiance to no one but themselves, they terrorized the areas in which they operated. Part of the appeal of the Communists was that in those areas where they met and crushed these gangs, their victories brought the ordinary peasants a respite from these miseries. Two consequences tended to follow. Impressed by the help given to them by the Communists, men in the villages joined the local Red Army units. Recruits also came from among the defeated or captured bandits who threw in their lot with Mao's forces. In the latter case, it was seldom a matter of eager volunteers converting to the Communist cause; the new recruits knew that the alternative to joining up was to be shot. This is not to deny that in many instances they subsequently became committed CCP fighters, but the PLA could certainly be as unscrupulous as the NRA in the methods used to maintain its troop numbers.

Communist fighters in 1945 carrying a mixture of old and new weapons including an impressive, locally made Thompson submachine gun. However, most of the weapons used by the PLA in the early stage of the civil war were captured Japanese stock passed on by the Soviet forces before they left Manchuria. (Cody Images)

In a number of respects, Mao's armies were initially not well prepared for a civil war. One problem was that the Communist troops were not conditioned for a sustained struggle. Their engagements with the Japanese had seldom been prolonged affairs; they were used to skirmishes not pitched battles. As local volunteers or conscripts, most of the soldiers were unhappy once they left their own areas. One of their marching songs before 1945 had been 'Let's beat the Japanese, so we can all go home'. Officers often resorted to lying or deception to hide their real destination from the troops. When, for example, some southern CCP units were sent by troopship from Shandong province to Manchuria, they were told they were sailing to somewhere nearer home.

Another limitation was the Communists' want of technical know-how. Despite the large number of weapons they captured or were given by the Soviet Union, including 700 Japanese tanks, 900 aircraft, 800,000 rifles, 14,000 machine guns and a large assortment of mortars, armoured vehicles and patrol boats, they often lacked a basic understanding of how to use them. This was especially true of the tanks and planes, which in the early stages of the

A landlord, pinioned and forced to kneel on sharp stones, faces a People's Court in a Communist-liberated area. Such scenes often climaxed with the public denunciation, beating and killing of the accused. This is the trial of Huang Chin-Chi, the owner of two-thirds of an acre of land. (© Bettmann/Corbis)

war stood idle simply because the Communists lacked the knowledge of how to work and maintain them. It was only after Nationalist troops with technical expertise had defected from Chiang's army to Mao's that the PLA were able to employ the weapons effectively.

A major factor in the build-up of the PLA was the incorporation into the Communist ranks of the 200,000-strong Manchuguo army, made up of Chinese soldiers who had fought for Japan in Manchuria before 1945. Troops who refused to accept incorporation were 'cleansed' – a euphemism for executed. During the civil war this was the fate that befell many PLA soldiers regarded as suspect by their Communist superiors. As many as 150,000 soldiers were cleansed in this way, often after they had been tortured to make them reveal their associates.

PLA strength was also increased by the thousands of Japanese PoWs who agreed under pressure to join the Communists; they acted as invaluable instructors in weapon use and tactics. By the end of the civil war, hundreds had lost their lives fighting for the Communist cause. North Korea, which fell under Soviet control at the end of the Pacific War, also contributed markedly to the war effort. Its proximity to the Communist bases in northern China made it a safe haven for PLA forces when they came under pressure. Moreover some 35,000 North Koreans fought in the Communist ranks, while others played a valuable role as civilian workers maintaining roads and railway lines in Communist-held areas.

At the time of the renewal of the civil war in 1946, Mao defined the strategy his commanders were to follow: 'For defeating Chiang Kai-shek the general method of fighting is mobile warfare. Therefore, the abandonment of certain places or cities is not only unavoidable but also necessary.' This was a continuation of the guerrilla warfare that the Communists had successfully conducted against both the Nationalists and the Japanese. However, as events were to show, Mao intended this as only a temporary strategy. His ultimate aim was to turn the PLA into a modern fighting force that would eventually be able to fight on its own terms and be capable of defeating the Nationalists in open confrontation. What gave Mao confidence that this could be achieved was that he had perceived the basic weakness of the enemy. He judged that while Chiang Kai-shek could call on American aid, 'the feelings of the people are against him, the morale of his troops is low, and his economy is in difficulty'.

Partly as a result of Maoist propaganda, the notion has developed of there having been a peasant revolution in the countryside during the civil war. The claim is that, beginning with the Manchurian peasants, the rural peoples of China rejected the Nationalists and appealed to the Communists to set up a new political and social order. This is largely myth. Certainly the CCP were the beneficiaries of the general resentment against Chiang's GMD government and its excesses, but it is not true that they enjoyed mass popular support. The creation of what the CCP called 'liberated' areas over which it held sway was far more often than not a consequence of Communist forces imposing themselves on those areas. Liberation was enforced on local peoples, not chosen by them.

When the CCP came to write the history of the consolidation of its power, they naturally portrayed it as a spontaneous rising of the people, who turned to Mao and the Red Army for deliverance from the depredations of local bandits, the misery of landlord oppression and the brutalities of the Nationalists. But the reality was often quite different. A grim feature of the civil war was the severe, often savage, way in

The inevitable end – when not beaten to death by the crowd, the convicted landlord would, as here, be shot in the back of the head. Between 1945 and 1950, some one million landlords died at the CCP's hands, many of them after being denounced by a People's Court. (© Bettmann/Corbis)

which the Communists imposed their authority in the liberated areas. In the years 1945–49 over one million landlords were killed, their deaths usually coming after they had been subjected to the most brutal treatment. That some of the local peasants eagerly joined in the terrorizing of the landlords was more a matter of satisfying long-standing local grievances than an embracing of Communism.

Although the Communists boasted of their practice of giving peasants in the liberated areas political representation by setting up village committees, the fact was that every committee had to have on it a CCP member with the power to veto decisions and direct policy. Furthermore, the CCP was always entirely ready to abandon the people of the liberated areas when the Nationalist threat became too great. There are no instances of the Communists putting themselves at risk of defeat by the GMD in order to defend the liberated areas. The calculation was always military, never humanitarian.

Yet it is not difficult to understand why so many of the localities were prepared, at least initially, to support the Communists' land campaign. The warlords and the Japanese occupiers had shown scant regard for the traditional patterns of life on the land, and the miseries of the peasants had increased. The landlords had hardly enhanced their reputation during the years of Japanese occupation. Many of them had collaborated, but simply assumed that with ending of the war in 1945 they were entitled, along with the landlords who had been ousted during the occupation, to return to their property and their privileges. They had learned nothing and forgotten nothing.

The result was that any party able to convince the peasants that it actually cared for them was likely to win support. Despite its promise to give priority to land reform and the ending of poverty, by the late 1940s Chiang's government could hardly claim success in this area. Indeed, one of the most unpopular steps that it took was to give military backing to those landlords who were prevented by local resistors from returning to their former properties or who had been dispossessed since they had returned. It created an opportunity for the CCP to win over the peasantry. Aware that the peasants would be very willing to identify landlord greed as the chief cause of their suffering, the Communists engaged in the ritual public humiliation of landowners. It was invariably a brutal business, with the peasants being urged to vent their fury and frustration on their exploiters.

The attack upon the landlords was the prelude to a series of struggle sessions that provided the means for the Communists to control the countryside. Peasants were required to hold regular public gatherings, at which those judged sympathetic to the landlords were forced to confess and accept punishment. These struggle sessions soon deteriorated into occasions for the peasants to settle old scores and feuds. If enough villagers ganged up on an unpopular individual or family, the accusations themselves were taken as proof of guilt. The screaming, shouting and chanting that accompanied these 'people's trials' generated the type of hysteria associated with extreme religious rituals.

Such was the emotional intensity of these gatherings that Mao used them as a way of indoctrinating the soldiers into the PLA. Recruits were encouraged to join in the bitter attacks on landlord and bourgeois injustice. One soldier became so frenzied while attending one of the sessions that, according to an army report, he collapsed physically and mentally. When he came round, he was a gibbering wreck.

There is a remarkable illustration of Mao's personal involvement in the suppression of the peasantry. In 1947 he sent his oldest son, Anying, whom he had always regarded as too meek, to take part in the proceedings in order to sharpen his revolutionary edge. Anying was certainly a sensitive type; he was shattered by what he observed and suffered a mental breakdown. In his diary he recorded how the people from a group of neighbouring villages, who

Mao Anying (right) with his father. Anying's tragic life, which included witnessing his mother's torture and execution by the GMD, and estrangement from his father; ended with his being killed while serving with the PLA in Korea in 1950. Anying's death was said to be the last time Mao was truly moved emotionally.

had shown insufficient enthusiasm for the CCP's methods, were made to attend an anti-landlord rally. The villagers were held for five days in an open area, which they were not permitted to leave. It was mid-winter, with the temperature below freezing point, and some died from exposure. Yet despite the cold the villagers finally warmed to their task. They began to chant Maoist slogans and scream abuse at the landlords who were made to kneel before them. On the fifth day, to the accompaniment of concerted yells of 'Kill, Kill, Kill!', the crowd, using fists, feet and wooden sticks, beat the eight pinioned landlords to death. Mao Anying recorded in his diary that the experience left him 'so full of pain' that he wept continuously. He wrote that his anguish was intensified by his awareness that the soldiers and party officials responsible for organizing the fearsome scenes he had witnessed were drawn from what he called 'the dregs of society'.

Of course, not all Communists came from the dregs of society. Some had feelings of revulsion, similar to Anying's, about the land reforms they were implementing. Indeed, some CCP members appealed to Mao Zedong to intervene to lessen the brutality in the countryside. They were taking a risk; he might well have turned on them. But in this instance Mao acknowledged their grievance. While admitting to no fault on his own part, he accepted that those lower down the chain of command had been guilty of blurring the distinction between 'what was permissible and what was not'. Mao instructed Liu Shaoqi, one of his most trusted and senior commanders, to take the blame on behalf of the top Party officials. Liu duly did so. He told the comrades in a circular intended for Party eyes only that he had allowed excesses to occur, but that Mao in his perceptive wisdom had spotted these and called a halt to them.

The Communists' ferocious land reform programme, which even Mao admitted had gone too far, ought to have given the Nationalists the opportunity to recover lost popularity with the peasants. But, with the blindness that was to characterize the GMD's dealings with the people throughout the civil war, they were in their own way as brutal as the Communists. The Nationalists diverted 150,000 troops to recover the villages liberated under the CCP's reform programme. Their task was to oversee the restoration to the surviving landlord families of the properties taken from them by the Communists. Again, it was a bitter affair. Accompanied by NRA squads, former landlords called on their former tenants and demanded full payment of the rent owing to them since they had been dispossessed by the Reds. Peasants who refused were beaten and shot. Village leaders who had willingly joined in the CCP's land reforms were buried alive as a warning to the peasants of the perils of co-operation with the Communists.

The PLA sought to exploit the reaction that the Nationalists' methods had created among the people. Lin Biao's forces had special propaganda detachments, whose main task was to think of ways that could persuade the waverers in the NRA ranks to give up and come over to them. Pamphlets with simple messages to this effect were smuggled into or dropped over enemy lines:

> Brothers, lay down your arms which you never wanted to take up. Did you join the Guomindang army freely? No, you were dragged into it at the end of a rope. Come over to us. If you want we will send you home. Better still, you can join us and fight to free your homes as we have ours.

As the propaganda indicated, an important aspect of the Communists' attitude was the development among them of a conviction that they were morally superior to the Nationalists. Their survival after decades of precarious existence, in which they had thwarted the attempts of the Japanese and the GMD to destroy them, gave them a powerful self-belief. This was reinforced by the teachings of Mao Zedong, who during the Yanan years had formulated the notion that the Chinese Communists were a providential force. They still had to win on the field of battle, of course, but insofar as high morale is a winning factor in war, the advantages were very much with the Communists.

The PLA commanders

An undoubted advantage that Mao had over Chiang was the loyalty of his commanders. While the GMD leader struggled throughout the war with insubordination among the military and was often betrayed by senior personnel who passed information to the Communists, Mao was seldom faced with opposition. The outstanding characteristic of Lin Biao, Zhu De, Zhou Enlai and Liu Shaoqi was their commitment to Mao as military leader. This extended to their allowing the credit for their own ideas and military successes to go to him. They were sometimes dubious about the correctness of some of Mao's judgements, but there was no case of their defying him once he had made a clear decision.

In the spring of 1945 at a major Party congress in Yanan, the CCP, in preparation for the renewed civil war that they knew was coming, had set up a Central Military Committee, composed of some 80 members appointed from the upper ranks of the Party. This in turn appointed an inner group, known as the Secretariat, which, under the ultimate authority of Mao Zedong as Chairman, was responsible for running the war. The leading members of this Committee were Zhu De, Zhou Enlai and Liu Shaoqi.

Zhu De, an experienced commander whose military links with Mao went back to the time of the Long March, had had his differences over strategy with Mao in those early times. Mao had wanted to preserve the CCP's strength by avoiding pitched battles with the Japanese, while Zhu had been eager to increase the CCP's military reputation by taking on the enemy. One result of Zhu's approach had been a bad mauling of the Red Army by the Japanese in 1941. This left a mark against Zhu's name. While it did not permanently damage him, since he continued to be an inspiring and successful general, it was always something that Mao was prepared to bring up to keep Zhu in his place. What also limited Zhu's influence was his relative lack of interest in politics. His training and instincts were military and he had no real taste for the political infighting that promotion within the CCP required.

Mao (right) with arguably his two most significant and consistently reliable civil war commanders: Zhou Enlai (second from left), who played a vital role in maintaining harmony among the PLA commanders, and Zhu De (centre) who was responsible for transforming the Red Army into a modern fighting force during the civil war.

Yet it was Zhu De who was primarily responsible for modernizing the PLA from 1945 onwards. Zhu's aim was to develop the various guerrilla units that formed the PLA into a connected and cohesive force. He believed effective communications to be essential in this; hence his emphasis on the

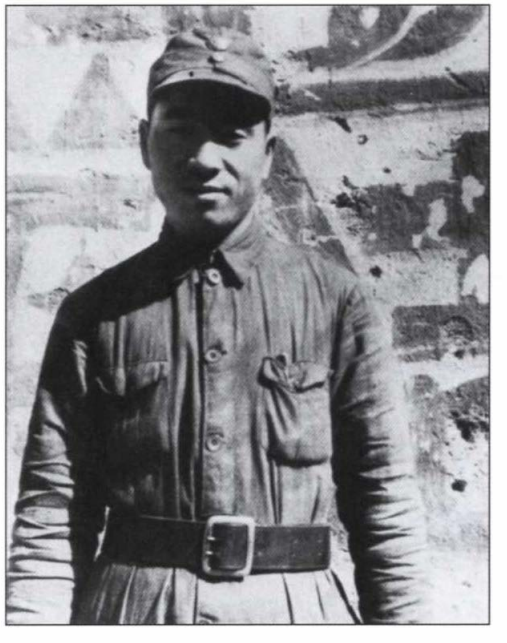
PLA forces breaching fortified walls in Shenyang. Chiang flew to Shenyang in September 1948 to bolster resistance but, realizing the city could not be saved, he flew out again without informing his high command of his intentions. This was typical of the liaison failures that often weakened the NRA. (Cody Images)

production of radios and signalling systems and the training of troops in their use. The Communists must also, he urged, have their own regular supply of equipment and weaponry. Until they had these they could not truly modernize – it was no longer sufficient to rely on capturing weapons from the enemy. The particular weaponry that Zhu demanded was artillery. His experience fighting both the Japanese and the Nationalists had convinced him that it was the PLA's lack of firepower that so often restricted them to merely harassing rather than defeating the enemy: 'our fighters often encounter pillboxes and temporary earthworks, common in mobile warfare, which keep them from gaining victory'. Zhu insisted that only with both light and heavy artillery and a reliable supply of shells would the PLA be able to develop effective assault tactics against fortified positions. Until that capability was achieved there was no realistic chance of seizing the urban areas of China, a prerequisite for winning the civil war.

One of Zhu's most interesting contributions to the Red Army was his insistence on practical responses and tactics. He had little time for the sloganizing that turned campaigns into a matter of trying to apply Mao's political sayings to the battlefield: 'Rid the ranks of all impotent thinking' or 'The Party commands the gun, the gun must never be allowed to command the Party'. Zhu saw little military value in seeking to inspire his troops in the heat of battle with such vague promptings. But this did not mean that he openly defied Mao on the political front. That was not his intention; his concerns were military. Mao for his part shrewdly judged that Zhu's talents as a soldier were what mattered. As long as Zhu proved successful, Mao was prepared to trust him. There was a sense in which military success became its own justification. To have held a position or made gains was a powerful argument for the correctness of the tactics that had produced that result. So it was as a tactician rather than as a strategist that Zhu was of greatest value to the Red Army. The fact was that, although Mao consulted him on strategy, Zhu played a relatively small role in the planning of the grand designs.

A second key member of the Secretariat, Zhou Enlai, was seldom involved in directing operations; his great usefulness to Mao lay in his diplomatic skills. Urbane and multilingual, Zhou up to 1945 had acted as the CCP's chief negotiator with the GMD, the Russians and the Americans. From 1945 Zhou, a master of discretion, employed his persuasive arts to prevent disagreements among CCP commanders from developing into serious military differences. His most marked characteristic was his loyalty to Mao. There is no serious example of Zhou ever opposing his leader. This was a huge asset to Mao. It meant that his two principal lieutenants, Zhou Enlai and Zhu De, were committed to him in a manner that created an imposing example for all lesser commanders and made serious opposition difficult if not unthinkable.

Lin Biao, an indispensable contributor to the Communist victories in the decisive Liaoshen and Pinjin campaigns. Mao recognized him as the PLA's ablest general which is why he was prepared to tolerate Lin's streak of independence. After 1949, Lin was the chief creator of the cult of Mao Zedong. (Philip Jowett)



Lin Biao was to die in an air crash in 1971 while fleeing from China, after being implicated in a plot to assassinate Mao. The execration in which his name was held thereafter wiped from public record all his previous achievements in promoting Mao and Chinese Communism. Yet these had been considerable. A colleague of Mao since the 1920s, and the principal of the anti-Japanese University at Yanan, Lin had won glory for himself and the CCP in 1937 by inflicting on the Japanese one of the few major defeats they suffered in China. Lin was later wounded and out of action for the last years of the struggle against Japan. However, having recovered, he returned to prominent command during the civil war. While never openly defying Mao's strategic decisions, he did show considerable independence of judgement. That Mao was willing to accept this suggests he regarded Lin as among the most gifted of his commanders.

It was Liu Shaoqi's tragedy that he came to be hated by Mao in the 1960s. In destroying Liu politically during the Cultural Revolution of that era, Mao effectively erased the contribution Liu had made to the winning of the civil war. Yet it had been Liu who devised what proved to be the highly successful CCP strategy in Manchuria, which brought about the turning point in the war. Moreover, he had been responsible for turning the liberated areas into sustainable administrative regions rather than mere military bases. It was largely on Liu's initiative that the PLA developed what became known as the 'march on the north, defend in the south' strategy. Judging that the Communists could not fight successfully in all the regions where they were present, Liu put into operation plans for concentrating the PLA's main forces in the east central triangle of Shandong, Anhui and Henan, a move that proved instrumental in the CCP's eventual victory.

One of the difficulties is knowing which strategies Mao initiated and which ones he simply appropriated. The documentary evidence is scanty, but it appears that whenever a particular approach proved successful Mao would assert that it had been his thinking all along. Such was his political control that there was little point, and much danger, in his commanders laying claim to the original plan. A logical conclusion is that it was not so much Mao's military skills, though these are not to be underestimated, but the political control that he exercised, which established his reputation as a commander. Since the 'rectification movement' of 1942–44, when he had ruthlessly purged the CCP and the Red Army by making even his highest-ranking colleagues and generals engage in humiliating public 'self-criticism', it was no longer legitimate or possible to challenge Mao openly. This hard reality deterred his military commanders from vying with Mao for acclaim even when their successes merited it.

The fighting

Prelude

In the period between the Japanese surrender in August 1945 and the renewal of the Chinese Civil War in June 1946, an unreal peace prevailed. Officially the Communists and the Nationalists observed a truce, but in reality they were preparing for war against each other. The truce had been a product of talks between Mao Zedong and Chiang Kai-shek that had begun in August 1945. Conducted under American auspices and initially backed by Stalin and the Soviet Union, the talks were held in Chongqing, the Nationalist stronghold on the Yangzi River. Mao had flown there from his Yanan base; fearing that the plane might be sabotaged on this, his first-ever flight, he had insisted that Patrick Hurley, the chief American representative, accompany him. Despite the talks lasting six weeks, Mao never lost the misgivings with which he had set out.

It was no surprise, therefore, when the talks broke down with a nominal truce still operating but no agreement reached on any major issue. Hurley returned home a disappointed man, asserting that it was primarily Chiang's obduracy that made a settlement impossible. President Truman, however, still believed that a compromise could be achieved. He sent the USA's most distinguished soldier and diplomat, General George Marshall, to try to broker a lasting agreement.

Mao (second left), the US Ambassador to China Patrick Hurley (centre) and Zhou Enlai (far right) at Yanan in 1945, shortly before flying to meet Chiang Kai-shek for talks. Mao's smile in this posed picture belies the trepidation he felt about flying to Chongqing. He was uncomfortable when not on ground of his own choosing. (Philip Jowett)

In December 1945 Marshall persuaded the two Chinese sides to meet again to negotiate. This second round of talks, held this time in Nanjing, the GMD's restored capital, was given the grand name of a Consultative Conference, but it was not a success. Among the many stumbling blocks was the GMD's concern that the Communists, while willing formally to recognize Chiang Kai-shek as the legitimate leader of China, were not willing to co-operate in practice. On the Communists' side there was deep doubt that the Nationalist regime would honour its promise to allow them to retain the liberated areas that they now held. It was their fear over this that led the Communists to walk out of the talks.

The plain truth was that neither side trusted the other. Even as they talked, they were seizing territory and making ready for renewed fighting. It was the CCP–GMD's mutual distrust that finally exasperated the Americans and led to their abandoning the attempt to act as mediators. Yet the US mission did not finally withdraw until January 1947. Its efforts to achieve a resolution during its last year in China had a highly significant, though unintended, consequence. In June 1946, Marshall had managed to get the two sides to agree to a ceasefire in Manchuria, a region that, since it was not technically part of China proper, had not been included in the truce that had fitfully operated since the Chongqing talks in 1945. Although this new ceasefire lasted only six weeks, it fundamentally altered the balance between the GMD and CCP.

To appreciate why this was so important it has to be understood that Chiang had made his first military objective the recovery of Manchuria. He had calculated that if the GMD could recover this huge region it would effectively destroy the CCP's influence in northern China, the only area where the Communists had strong bases. That was why, at the conclusion of the Japanese war, Chiang had immediately begun sending troops into Manchuria. This process was quickened following the Soviet Union's withdrawal of its army from Manchuria in the spring of 1946. Chiang targeted Changchun, the capital city of Jilin province. Mao Zedong responded immediately. Knowing that it was vital to control at least one major urban area in Manchuria, he directed Lin Biao to occupy Harbin, Heilongjiang's capital city. By early May it was in Communist hands.

Nevertheless, the GMD's attempt to impose itself on the region had put the Communists under great pressure and they had been forced to give ground. There was no guarantee that they could continue to hold Harbin. That is what made Chiang's agreement to a ceasefire in Manchuria in the summer of 1946 so critical. The lull in the fighting gave Mao's forces an opportunity to strengthen their position and wipe out the gains the Nationalists had recently made there. From being on the point of withdrawing from Harbin, their toehold in Manchuria, the Communists were able to turn about and over the next two weeks of the truce take over a large area that extended to the border with the USSR.

The struggle for Manchuria

Even before the brief ceasefire had given the initiative to the PLA, the Nationalists had experienced great problems in trying to impose themselves on the region. Manchuria, equal in size to western Europe and made up of three main provinces, Heilongjiang, Jilin and Liaoning, had for 14 years after 1931 been the Japanese puppet state of Manchuguo. When Japan surrendered in 1945, the Nationalists had thus inherited what had been an efficient, albeit coercive, administration. But they were unable to sustain it. The GMD troops, flown in by the Americans, were not welcomed as liberators. The administrators whom Chiang appointed had little understanding of local conditions and peoples. Widespread resistance from the peasants to the GMD's attempt to impose itself was exploited by the Communists who presented themselves as defenders of the people.

Nationalist soldiers pose outside their sandbag-fortified HQ in Shenyang, the Manchurian capital, in 1946. (Philip Jowett)

A key factor in the PLA's harassing of the Nationalists was the amount of help they received from local civilians, who destroyed telegraph and telephone lines and tore up sections of railway in order to disrupt GMD troop movements. By 1947 over 10,000 miles of railway line had been sabotaged. Deprived of reliable communications and faced with sniping and guerrilla attacks in the countryside, for which they lacked adequate detailed maps, the GMD commanders preferred to keep their troops safe within the fortified walled compounds in the towns. In effect, they became besieged in their own bases in Manchuria. It was an inglorious policy and effectively handed Manchuria back to the Communists. The region would continue to be disputed between the CCP and GMD, but Chiang's failure to recover Manchuria in the first stage of the war revealed how limited support was for his regime.

Harbin

Once successfully established in Harbin, the CCP turned it into its chief base in Manchuria. It was the first major urban success story in the CCP's history and became the organizational model for the other cities and towns that the Communists came to occupy. A city of some 800,000 people, Harbin was divided into six districts, which were in turn sub-divided into smaller zones. Each was tightly organized, with Party control reaching right down to street level where surveillance

units monitored local activity and acted as a police force. Constant propaganda through newspapers, radio broadcasts, banners and posters extolled the virtues of the city's new regime. The commercial businesses that were permitted to continue were heavily taxed and required to shape their activities according to CCP demands. The local people had to contribute money and labour to the upkeep of the Communist armies. Movement into, out of and within the city was strictly controlled by the issue of travel permits. Proof of the effectiveness of such controls was Harbin's ability to survive an outbreak of bubonic plague in 1947. Although 30,000 inhabitants died, the public health measures imposed by the Communist authorities contained the spread of the disease and prevented it from devastating the city.

Harbin was also of vital military significance. After securing the city Mao, in consultation with his military commanders,

principally Lin Biao, Chen Yi and He Long, developed a basic strategy that sought to increase the CCP's hold in Manchuria and northern China while withdrawing from most of central China above the Yangzi River. Mao's stated belief was 'If we have Manchuria, our victory will be guaranteed'. His words were to prove prophetic, as Manchuria was to be the key to the Communists' ultimate success in 1949. It was the area where they were at their strongest and so able to match the Nationalists in manpower and resources.

Manchuria also had the advantage of being the most industrially advanced region of China, a legacy of its long occupation by the Japanese. Although the Soviet forces had during their 1945–46 occupation stripped it of as much of its industrial supplies as could be moved, the region still remained a major prize in Mao's eyes. Manchuria's long border with the USSR also appeared to offer a safe haven to which the Communists could withdraw.

Well-equipped PLA troops prepare to ambush the enemy near Harbin. (Cody Images)

Mao used a metaphor to describe the CCP's comfortable position in Manchuria in 1946. He likened Mongolia and North Korea to the supportive sides of an armchair with the Soviet border providing the back rest.

It was the CCP's grip on Harbin that enabled Lin Biao to develop the Communist army in Manchuria. Lin's was a new army with new ideas. It was no longer simply the set of guerrilla detachments that had made up Mao's forces in the previous struggles against the Nationalists and the Japanese. Lin's objective was to build an army of trained and equipped divisions, capable of sustained warfare against large-scale enemy forces. Harbin provided him with the space in which to prepare such an army. The fruits of Lin's endeavours were evident in his repulsing of the Nationalist forces when they tried to take Harbin in the early months of 1947.

Under heavy pressure from NRA counter-attacks in the winter of 1946–47, the Communists had to give up over 150 towns, including Zhangjiakou, and had fallen back before the GMD advance northward from the Shanhaiguan pass. The Nationalists, judging that the bitter seasonal weather of the region would delay any chance of Communist recovery, had set up winter quarters south of the frozen Sungari River, not expecting any serious fighting until the spring. Using surprise to his advantage, Lin sent his forces across the ice to attack the Nationalists in their own base. Forced to fall back, the Nationalists were further staggered by the scale of the assault that Lin then launched. A force of nearly 400,000 Communists attempted to seize the key railway junction of Siping. Chiang Kai-shek rushed land and aerial forces north to prevent its loss. The Reds retreated but not before they had taken possession of hundreds of thousands of abandoned Nationalist weapons. The effrontery of Lin's attack had shown that Chiang's notion of the Communists as mere rural bandits who could be steadily mopped up was now hopelessly unrealistic.

Despite their reverses in Manchuria, the Nationalists had not suffered a major defeat.

Mao Zedong in 1937 (aged 44) in Yanan, where he created a Chinese soviet between 1935 and 1945 which successfully resisted continued GMD attacks on it. It was during his years at Yanan that Mao developed the ruthless political and military strategies that would eventually take him to power. (Cody Images)

They still had the overall advantage in numbers and were still in possession of Shenyang, the capital of Liaoning province. They also held a number of key lines of communication, which gave them control of northern China. Three of these fanned out from Beijing: the route between Beijing via the Shanhaiguan pass to Shenyang; the south-western corridor linking Beijing and Taiyuan, where the army of the pro-GMD Shanxi warlord, Yan Xishan, was stationed; and the railway line that ran north-west from Beijing to Zhangjiakou. Another major route under Nationalist control was that between Jinan on the Yellow River and Qingdao. It was to be the loss of these passes to the PLA that eventually ended the GMD's control of northern China.

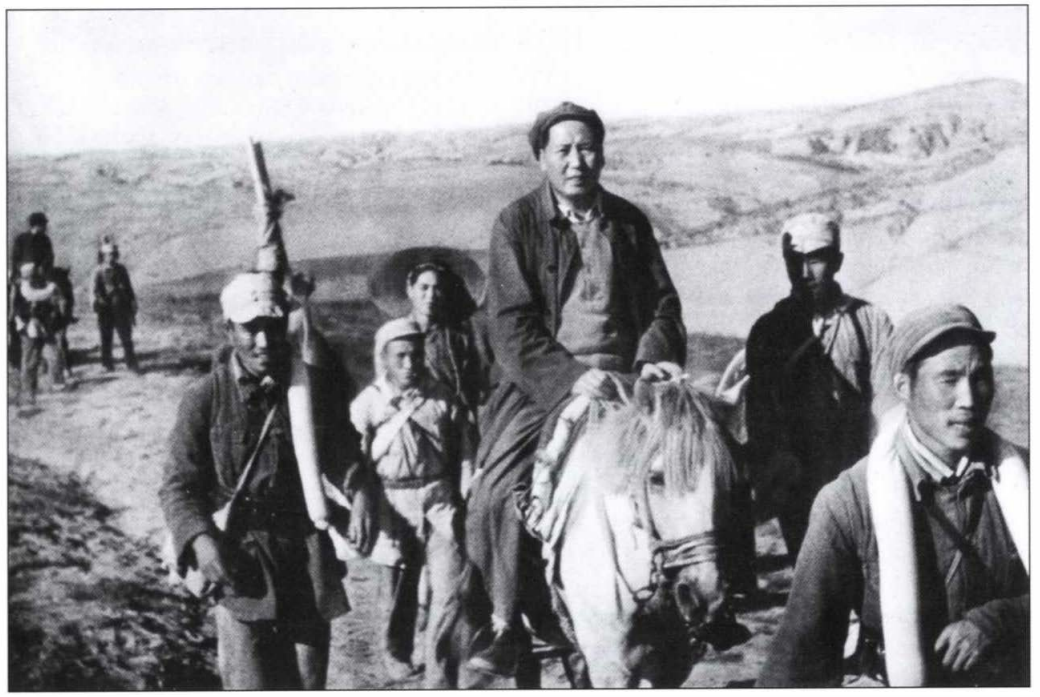
Despite the appearance of control that the presence of 200,000 Nationalist troops in northern China gave Chiang, the reality was that with the successful PLA defence of Harbin the initiative had passed to the Communists. The Nationalists' superior air power was nullified by the destruction of the airstrips and runways that the PLA found so easy to attack and the NRA so hard to defend. Similarly, the repeated sabotage of the railway lines made the large-scale movement of Nationalist troops extremely difficult. It was the loss of the airfields that proved decisive. Chiang was unable to provide the air cover to protect his forces on the ground or launch aerial attack on Communist positions. Early in 1947 Claire Chennault, the freelance American air ace, came to their assistance by flying in supplies, but his impressive efforts brought only partial relief to the beleaguered GMD positions.

Yanan and the strongpoint offensive

In March 1947 GMD forces captured Yanan, the Communist base which Mao had fled to at the end of the Long March, and where he constructed an alternative Chinese social and political system. A few months later, to luxuriate in the capture, Chiang Kai-shek flew into Yanan and walked along the streets and into the cave dwellings where Mao had once lived. The Nationalists hailed this as a great triumph, which would be the prelude to their recovery from the loss of Manchuria. For a short period the taking of Yanan raised Nationalist morale, and territorial gains were made in Shanxi and neighbouring provinces.

Yet what Chiang intended as a great symbolic act of liberation proved an empty success. Mao had received forewarning of the impending attack on Yanan. The leaked intelligence had come from the office of the NRA general who led the attack, Hu Zongnan. The leak probably came from a secretary, but there have been suggestions that Hu, a secret Communist sympathizer, may himself have been the source. The presence of moles and crypto-Communists in the Nationalist armies was a problem that would dog Chiang throughout the civil war.

No matter who had passed on the information, the fact was that by the time the Nationalist forces reached Yanan it was a deserted city. Acting on Mao's instructions, Peng Dehuai had fought a holding action just south of the city against the advanced units of the approaching NRA force. This had given time for the bulk of the Communists to withdraw, taking their essential equipment with them. Although at the time forced upon Mao by circumstance, the abandonment of Yanan became part of Mao's policy to leave the Nationalists only meaningless victories. He told his commanders: 'We should not try to stop



Mao rides out from Yanan in March 1947, leaving Chiang Kai-shek an empty city and a hollow victory. Mao's readiness to abandon the Soviet base which the CCP had spent over a decade constructing was a striking example of his unsentimental and pragmatic approach to war. (Cody Images)

them. Chiang thinks when he has seized the devils' lair, he will win. In fact, he will lose everything. We will give Chiang Yanan. He will give us China.'

The GMD's taking of Yanan belonged to a larger strategic picture. Chiang, judging that he had gained control of the main regions of Hebei, switched his attack to Shandong and Shanxi. This 'strongpoint offensive' as the GMD referred to it proved to be a major error. Adopting it involved the Nationalists overstretching their lines with the result that, although they often held superior positions, they were unable to concentrate their forces in such a way as to inflict a major defeat on the enemy. As the intended offensive petered out, Lin Biao and Nie Rongzhen led the Communists in a series of counter-attacks. So successful were these that they marked a key stage in the civil war. The GMD had effectively lost north-eastern China; the initiative had passed to the Communists. It was an initiative they were never to surrender.

The success of the counter-offensive convinced Mao that it was time to alter the strategy with which he had begun the war. By the time the Nationalists took Yanan the Communists had already begun to build a new base around Zhangjiakou in Hebei province. It was from there that Mao directed the next stage of the strategy, which was aimed at exhausting the Nationalist armies. In 1946 he had judged that, since his forces were outnumbered and less well equipped than the GMD's, his tactics would have to be essentially a continuation of the hit-and-run guerrilla methods he had customarily followed. He had seen the civil war developing as a long attritional affair. However the failure of Chiang's 'strongpoint offensive' suggested to Mao that the Communists could now carry the battle to the enemy and win outright against the Nationalists. There were divisions of opinion within the CCP over this, between those who, following Mao's lead, wanted to follow an offensive strategy

and those, like Lin Biao and Chen Yi, who wanted time to build up their forces and who therefore argued for the continuation of what they called 'mobile defence'.

Interestingly, although Mao was the presiding genius, he did allow considerable operational freedom to his commanders in the field. He was invariably willing to let his commanders adjust their tactics in the light of the actual position in which they found themselves. He provided the broad strategic lines but gave them latitude to follow their instincts and operational judgements. This did not mean that he was ever other than the ultimate military authority. He retained the reins of power.

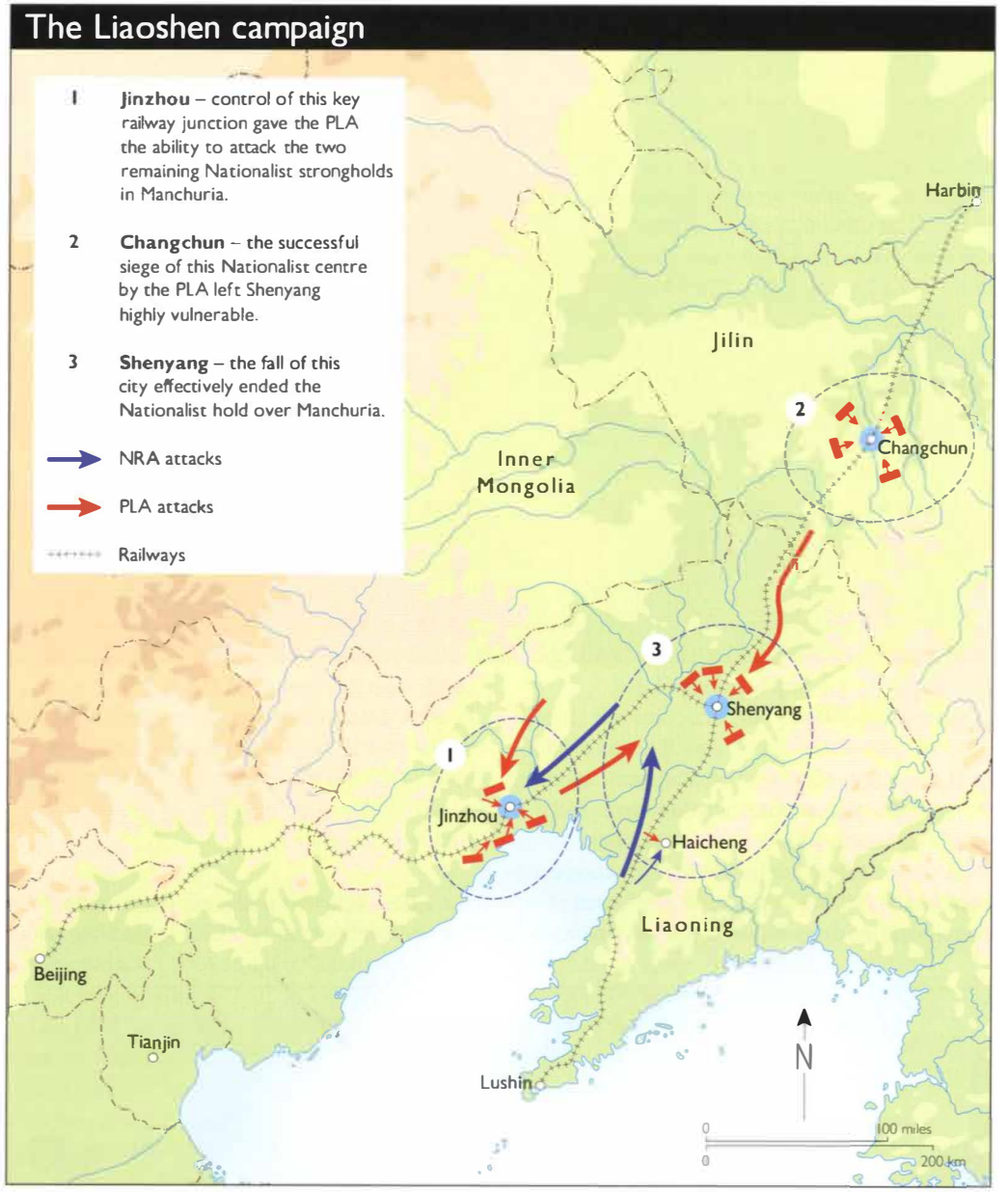
The decisive campaigns 1948–49

The Liaoshen (Liaoning–Shenyang) campaign, 12 September–12 November 1948

In the summer of 1948, the civil war entered its most decisive and destructive stage. Mao, who had established his military HQ at Xibaipo in Hebei province where he stayed between May 1948 and March 1949, was convinced that the tide had turned and was flowing strongly in his favour. He ordered his commanders to abandon 'mobile defence' and undertake the GMD's 'total destruction'. Gone now was any notion of a compromise peace. In response Lin Biao, having taken time to build up his forces, targeted the last two major cities in Manchuria to which the Nationalists still clung – Changchun and Shenyang. But before either of those cities could be taken the Nationalist base of Jinzhou needed to be destroyed, since as a key railway junction it linked Beijing to the two northern cities.

Aware of the threat, Chiang flew to Shenyang to take direct command. Nearly a quarter of a million NRA troops were diverted to defend Jinzhou. All to no avail; despite suffering heavy casualties in their attack, the surrounding PLA forces, which under Lin Biao had become increasingly proficient in artillery use, ceaselessly fired shells into Jinzhou until the defences were broken. Fierce close-quarter combat followed as the PLA advanced street by street until on 15 October the GMD, already severely weakened by large numbers of desertions, finally surrendered.

PLA infantry leave their trenches to assault a walled town in Liaoning province in 1948. (Cody Images)



A similar fate soon befell Changchun. Under siege since August, the Nationalists had tried to break out on several occasions but had been unable to pierce the surrounding PLA ring. After three months of fearful privation that reduced the population to cannibalism, with corpses being bought and sold for food, Changchun finally surrendered on 26 October. The Nationalist cause had not been well served by their leaders at Changchun. A number of NRA officers made contact with the enemy, offering to come over to their side. Mao sent personal orders that any Nationalist deserters should be accepted into the PLA and allowed to retain their officer rank. Some of the defecting officers advised the PLA on where the weakest points were in the city's defences and where the survivors were sheltering. They then supervised the shelling of these

areas. The city's death toll numbered a quarter of a million. It was said that so many bodies lay in the surrounding marshland, where would-be escapers had been shot down, that they created a causeway over which the PLA crossed into the city. The 100,000 Nationalist troops who had fought to the end, including their commander, Zheng Dongguao, became PLA prisoners.

With their loss of Changchun, the Nationalists now faced an even more daunting question as to whether they could keep hold of their last base in Manchuria, Shenyang, which stood isolated now that its link with Beijing had been cut with the fall of Jinzhou. Chiang Kai-shek, who had returned to Beijing, was determined to deny the PLA the final great Manchurian prize.

There was confusion in the GMD high command. Some, including Chiang, believed that a committed and successful defence of Shenyang was the only way to offset the gains made by the Communists. Others argued that to risk another struggle and defeat on the scale of Jinzhou and Changchun would play into the hands of the PLA, which now outnumbered the NRA and held better strategic positions. The decision on whether to stand and fight at Shenyang or move out and face the PLA on more advantageous ground was taken out of the Nationalists' hands by the speed with which the Communist forces moved to encircle the city. Lin Biao, having taken Jinzhou, led his forces north to cut off Shenyang. A Nationalist force, the New 1st Army, was sent under Liao Yaoxiang to relieve Shenyang but found itself outflanked by Lin's army as it approached the city. In a nine-day battle from 20–28 October at Heishan, the 1st Army was decimated, Liao was captured and the Nationalists lost 100,000 men overall.

Shenyang now lay largely unprotected. By the end of October the Nationalists were surrounded on all the approaches to the city. With scant relief provided by air drops and supplies flown in, it became apparent that Shenyang had little chance of holding out. The Nationalists' predicament was

Nationalist pilots with their American-provided P-51 Mustangs. Although the Nationalists did produce individual ace fighter pilots and squadrons, their overall failure to promote either aircraft production or pilot training on a significant scale meant that they did not develop air power as an effective arm of their fighting services during the civil war. (Cody Images)

compounded by confusion and betrayal among their commanders. Wei Lihuang, Chiang's commander-in-chief in the north-east, abruptly left Shenyang by plane, passing on the direct responsibility for Shenyang's defence to Zhou Fucheng.

It was a poisoned chalice. The approach of the PLA and the lack of leadership among the Nationalist military produced an uncontrollable panic within the city. The violent fighting in the streets over dwindling food stocks and for the places on the last trains and aircraft to leave Shenyang illustrated the impossibility of organizing any form of effective defence. By the time the PLA broke into the city on 1 November there was only token resistance; the Nationalist resolve had evaporated. The formal surrender followed on 2 November.

The fall of Shenyang marked the culmination of the Liaoshen campaign, a campaign that within a period of three months had seen the defeat of the GMD in the three major battles of Changchun, Jinzhou and Shenyang, and in scores of smaller but connected engagements. The NRA had lost over 400,000 men through casualties and desertions. Scarcely 150,000 troops were able to escape south to regroup. But it was more than a series of military defeats. In strategic terms it meant that the Communists now controlled Manchuria, the first great prize in the civil war.

Chiang himself referred to its loss as a 'world catastrophe'. It was a certainly a Nationalist catastrophe. In 1946 Chiang had calculated that if the Nationalists took Manchuria it would re-establish their dominance and be the first step towards realizing his aim of controlling the whole of China. But now two years later the position had been precisely reversed. Having taken Manchuria, the Communists had effective control of north-east China. This was now the base from which they could plan the campaigns to dislodge the Nationalists from the rest of the mainland. The mentality of the two sides had changed. From the Liaoshen campaign on, the PLA were on the attack and the NRA were in retreat.

Chiang's thoughts turned to saving something by returning to the idea of a compromise settlement. He made overtures to both the Americans and the USSR as to whether they would consider acting as brokers again between the GMD and the Communists. But the time for that had passed. The war was swinging too strongly in Mao's favour for him to give consideration to such a proposal. He wanted the destruction of the GMD and believed that this was now achievable.

The Huaihai campaign, November 1948–January 1949

There was a well-known saying among Chinese strategists: 'Manchuria is a limb of the nation, the central provinces are the heart.' In that saying lay the explanation for what proved to be the pivotal struggle of the civil war, the Huaihai campaign, so called because the bulk of the fighting occurred in the region between the Huai River and the Longhai railway. The prelude to the campaign was Chiang Kai-shek's decision, in response to the loss of Manchuria, to withdraw the bulk of his troops from Shandong province with the aim of preventing further southward movement by the Communists into the central provinces. Chiang judged that what was at stake was nothing less than the possession of China's 'heart'.

Su Yu, the overall planner of the PLA's Huaihai campaign, was another of the PLA commanders who made effective use of the information passed to him by moles in the Nationalist armies. He had won respect in earlier campaigns for the way he had fully prepared his forces for offensive moves.

Chiang chose to group his forces around the city of Xuzhou, a key junction on the Longhai railway that ran between the Yellow and the Yangzi rivers and connected the GMD capital, Nanjing, and the great port of Shanghai. He believed that Xuzhou was eminently defensible; the hills to the north of the city would slow the progress of any attackers, while the flatter land to the south would enable NRA supply lines to be maintained. Chiang also reckoned that he had time on his side, calculating that it would take months for the PLA to gather enough troops for a concerted attack.

Chiang was wrong. Mao had already made the critical decision not to wait for troop reinforcements from the north; he ordered Deng Xiaoping immediately to enlist into the PLA the Nationalist troops who had either defected or been taken prisoner in the fighting in Shandong. Overruling the objections of those of his commanders who argued that this was too great a risk, Mao insisted that such augmentation of the PLA must now be a consistent policy. 'No prisoner will be let go. Most of them will be filled into our troops. The human resources for our troops to defeat Chiang mainly come from prisoners.' He told Deng Xiaoping and Liu Bocheng, his main campaign commanders, that unless this policy was followed the PLA would be unable to sustain its war effort.

Mao's urgency was explained by his understanding, which paralleled Chiang's, that the war had reached a critical stage. He grasped the momentous consequences that would ensue if the Nationalists, following their loss of Manchuria, could be dealt a further decisive blow in central China. It would leave them without a realistic hope of recovery. In arguably the most perceptive military judgement he was ever to take, Mao saw in the Huaihai campaign the chance to bring the war to a rapid and successful conclusion. It would justify his earlier decision to abandon attrition and embark on a war of total annihilation of the Nationalists.

In Mao's frequent absences from the meetings of the Secretariat, Liu Shaoqi acted as chairman, a position that gave him considerable influence. His political disgrace in the 1960s obscured the fact that he had been one of the most resourceful and successful of the PLA's civil war strategists. (akg-images)

True to his practice of rapidly promoting officers who had proved successful in the field, Mao entrusted the main planning of the Huaihai campaign to Su Yu, who had distinguished himself in the recent fighting in Shandong. Su believed that speed was vital. He wanted to engage the main Nationalist forces before they had time to move south and regroup – which, he judged, they would do if they realized that the enlarged PLA was intent on a pitched battle.

As happened in a number of key moments in the civil war, the Nationalists were the

cause of their own misfortunes. Disputes between commanders hindered effective liaison; even when workable plans were drafted, these were in danger of being passed on to the Communists by moles within the GMD. Such was the case now. Su Yu received intelligence that told him of a major NRA troop movement that involved the 7th Army Group temporarily leaving Xuzhou to link up with an NRA force coming from the coast. Su ordered an immediate attack before the link could be made.

Within five days Xuzhou had been surrounded. The 7th Army Group under General Huang Baitao turned and tried to fight its way back into Xuzhou. It performed gamely but, cut off from supplies and reinforcements, it was pounded by heavy artillery for ten days before eventually being overwhelmed in late November at Zhanzhuan.

Huang Baitao committed suicide. His army's defeat and his own tragic end might have been avoided had he received help from the 2nd NRA Army. However, although it had been in a position to assist, the 2nd Army had made no move. This was because its commander, Qiu Qinquan, nursed a grievance against Huang and so refused to commit his forces to a genuine relief effort. It was yet another of those feuds that so often undermined NRA effectiveness.

Not realizing the extent of the PLA's control, Chiang sent reinforcements north, only for these to be attacked and scattered south of Xuzhou by Deng Xiaoping's main force, which then went on to take Suxian. This left Xuzhou isolated. Meanwhile the PLA's East China Field Army led by Chen Yi, a Long March veteran, had pushed its way up from the south while the Central Plains Army under Liu Bocheng, known as 'the One-eyed Dragon' since he had been half-blinded in a grenade explosion, approached from the west. The combined Communist forces totalled some half a million troops. Yet the 300,000 Nationalist troops had an advantage in tanks, armoured vehicles and artillery. In the early stages of the fighting they held their own and inflicted severe casualties on some of the PLA units. However, heavy November rain turned much of the ground into quagmires, which made co-ordinated tank and vehicle movement practically impossible. Then in December the mud turned to snow-covered ruts as a bitter freeze set in.

Adding to the Nationalists' difficulties was their lack of effective air cover. Not only had they lost a large number of fighter aircraft in the recent Liaoshen campaign, which they had not had time to replace, what planes they did have were prevented from flying by persistent snow falls, which obscured visibility. Deprived of supplies, the defenders began to run short of ammunition and food. The PLA's loudspeaker broadcasts promising the defenders food if they came over encouraged a growing number of desertions; starving soldiers and civilians slipped through the lines at night either to escape or to join the PLA.

The desertions showed the virtue of Mao's specific order, issued during the struggle for Xuzhou, that PoWs be treated as potential recruits by offering them the chance of survival if they changed sides. In contrast, the Nationalists exercised no such calculated clemency. The severity of the fighting over Xuzhou made the taking of prisoners by the GMD impractical even had it been desirable. Henry Lieberman, an American newspaper reporter who travelled as an observer with one of Chiang's armies during the campaign, witnessed the grim practice followed by the Nationalists. He recorded that they frequently shot wounded PLA prisoners or left them to die, their justification being that they lacked sufficient medical facilities to treat their own troops, let alone the enemy's.

Liu Chih, who had taken over command of the Nationalist campaign, ordered a counter-attack to try to pierce the PLA ring

PLA officers during the Huaihai campaign, using loudhailers to call on the Nationalists in the opposing trenches to surrender. This was a common and increasingly successful Communist technique as the war went on. The offer of food and fair treatment often proved irresistible to the demoralized Nationalists. (Cody Images)

Part of a PLA motorized division massing near Shenyang in October 1948. The American-made trucks had been captured from the Nationalists, and Japanese prisoners and defecting Nationalists played a key role in training the PLA in the effective handling and deployment of tanks and military vehicles. (Cody Images)

that had formed. His aim was not simply to save the beleaguered Nationalist forces but to protect Nanjing, the GMD capital, which the recent PLA successes had put under threat. Liu Chih claimed that he was closing a deadly trap around the Communist forces but it proved a vain boast. The deadly trap had been made by the PLA, not the Nationalists. To make their grip on Xuzhou unbreakable, the PLA had devastated a whole area, formed by a semi-circle whose radius stretched for 20 miles to the north of the city. Within that region villages had been razed and their people taken prisoner. A dark pall hung over the battle area as the columns of grey smoke from the burning villages mixed with the black smoke that arose from the fuel and ammunition dumps that had been set ablaze with incendiary devices.

Faced with such a desperate situation, the majority view among Chiang's high command was that with Xuzhou effectively lost, the only realistic military course was to withdraw all Nationalist forces from the area so that they could regroup elsewhere. This would mean that the NRA would have suffered only a setback, not a major defeat. But Chiang, showing the stubbornness that he often confused with decisiveness, refused to accept that the whole Huaihai campaign was to be abandoned. He ordered that all NRA armies were to hold their ground and counter-attack where possible in order to distract the PLA's attention, while the Nationalist 13th Army fought its way out of Xuzhou.

General Du Yuming, who was now in command in Xuzhou, remained loyal to Chiang and prepared his troops, who were surviving on grass and animal bones, for one final attempt to break out. But events overtook him. On 6 January 1949 the PLA attacked Xuzhou on every front in a major tank, artillery and infantry offensive. Four

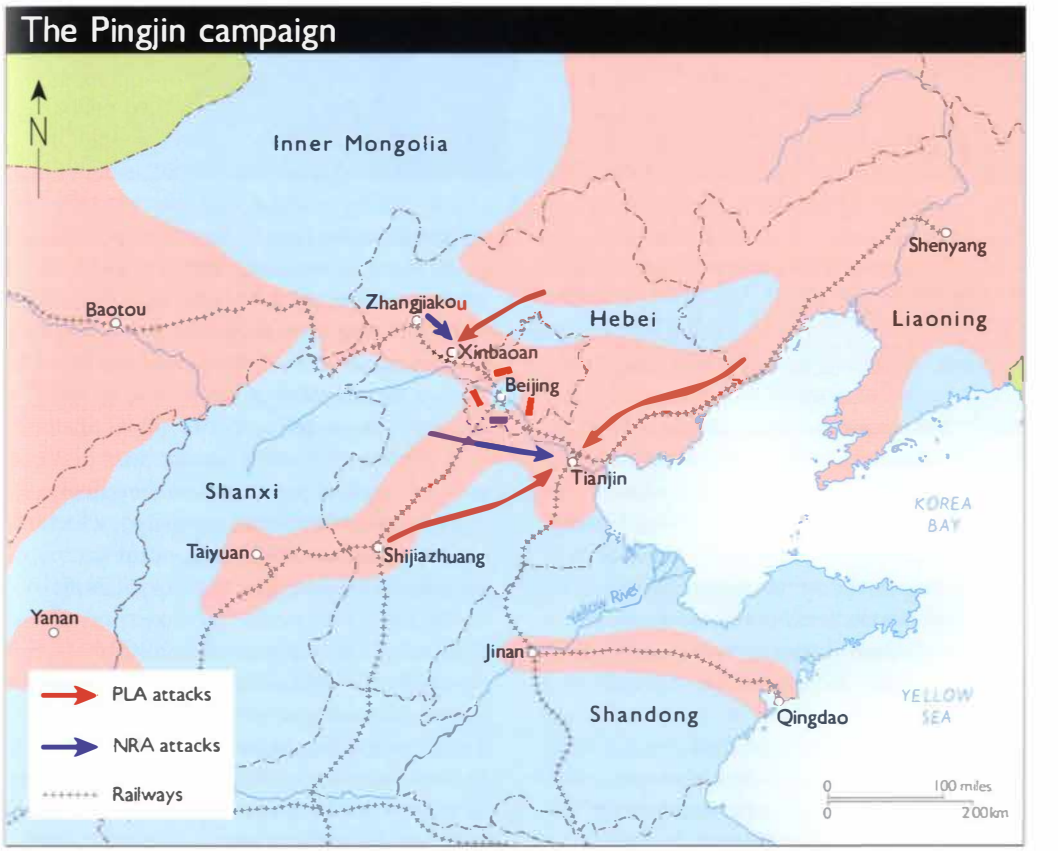
days later the city fell. One hundred thousand NRA troops, including General Du, surrendered and were taken prisoner. The 6th and 8th Armies, realizing the hopelessness of it all, had already given up their attempt to relieve Xuzhou.

It was the catastrophic defeat Mao had hoped for and Chiang had feared. All told, the Nationalists had lost a figure approaching 200,000 men, many of them the flower of Chiang's armies. His elite corps had been broken and a huge amount of equipment, the greater part being high-quality American weaponry, had fallen into Communist hands. Worse still for Chiang was that the Communists now controlled northern and central China. The way to the Nationalists' strongholds in southern China now lay open. President Truman, who knew from Treasury figures that the USA had already provided the GMD with $2 billion in aid and $1 million in military hardware, told his State Department officials that Chiang was now a 'busted flush' who no longer deserved American aid.

What intensified the bitterness of the GMD's routing in the Huaihai campaign was that it coincided with the third great victory of the Communists in the winter of 1948/49 – success in the Pingjin campaign.

The Pingjin campaign, November 1948–January 1949

The speed of the PLA's triumph in the Liaoshen and Huaihai campaigns presented Mao with a problem. Should he immediately press on with his main objective – the destruction of Nationalist power in southern China – or should he pause to take Beijing and Tianjin, the two cities in northern China to which the GMD still clung? In strategic terms, there was no pressing need to occupy Beijing. Since the Communists now



PLA cavalry near Beijing. This type of light horsemen proved of great value to the Communists in their taking of inaccessible area such as the Shanhai pass. The PLA's control of the main passes that linked Beijing with key areas gave the Communists a major strategic advantage in the latter stages of the civil war. (Philip Jowett)

controlled northern China, Beijing offered no threat to them. It was merely a Nationalist pocket that would doubtless fall in time. However, a triumphalist note entered Mao's thinking. To seize Beijing, China's northern capital and central to the nation's history, would be of massive symbolic value, and this would surely justify diverting troops to its capture even if it involved delaying the PLA's movement southwards.

For Mao, therefore, it was essentially a matter of prestige, but he was also exercised by the knowledge that, although Beijing was held by the Nationalists under their commander, Fu Zuoyi, there were a number of dissident movements within the city ready to challenge the GMD's authority. In July 1948 it had taken rifle fire to disperse a demonstration by 3,000 protesters. Mao wanted to take Beijing before such groups became a threat to the CCP's own authority.

It was such thinking that led him to order his commanders Lin Biao and Nie Rongzhen to undertake the Pingjin campaign, which took its name for the linking of the last syllables of Peiping, the Nationalist name for Beijing, and Tianjin, the main port on the gulf of the Yellow River and linked to the capital by the Grand Canal. The campaign, whose chronology overlapped the other two major campaigns, began in late November. Fu Zuoyi also had a decision to make. Should he move his 350,000-strong army to assist the Nationalist forces who were under such pressure elsewhere in the north, or should he consolidate his position by drawing in the various GMD forces spread around the north China plain to tighten the Beijing–Tianjin line? Fu decided on the latter. It was the attempt to withdraw the GMD forces from Zhangjiakou, a town to the north-west of Beijing, that precipitated the first move in the campaign.

Learning of Fu Zuoyi's decision, Mao told Nie Rongzhen to link up with Lin Biao's forces and cut off the Nationalist army as it moved south. The NRA columns found themselves ambushed at Xinbaoan, a town north of Beijing. In an attempt to save the entrapped units, Fu called on the NRA's 35th Army at Tianjin to come to their aid, but as the 35th approached Xinbaoan they too became caught between Nie's and Lin's attackers. In late December sustained shellfire from a range of batteries pinned the defenders in the walled town, whose defences were steadily reduced to rubble. PLA infantry then poured through the gaps; a blood orgy followed as the troops went from street to street, house to house, killing those who continued to resist.

By the time the surrender finally came, Guo Jingyun, Xinbaoan's NRA commander, had shot himself. In a macabre gesture the PLA, having first refrigerated Guo's corpse in the frozen ground, later sent it on to Beijing where it was publicly displayed as a terrifying intimation of what was likely to befall the inhabitants.

The fall of Xinbaoan sealed the fate of Zhangjiakou, which within two days had also been taken by the PLA, this time with little resistance shown by the defenders. Mao next targeted Tianjin, where the bulk of the NRA's armies were stationed. There was some delay before an attack was made. One reason was that the recent defeats had depressed Fu Zuoyi, to the point where he doubted that the Communists were now stoppable. He sent representatives to them suggesting a truce, hoping – fruitlessly as it turned out – that in the meantime Chiang and Mao would consider reopening peace talks.

The second reason for the delay was that Zhou Enlai put it to Mao that a heavy bombardment of Tianjin and Beijing risked irreparably damaging those cities' industrial and manufacturing plants, which if taken intact could greatly aid the CCP's war effort. Lin Biao also added to the case for avoiding battle over Pingjin by suggesting that it would serve the PLA's interests better if they were to conserve their forces and concentrate on taking southern China.

Mao gave thought to these arguments, but in the end he kept to his original notion that the prestige value of taking Tianjin and Beijing outweighed all other considerations; the campaign would go on. Mao later told the Soviet Union that he had deliberately delayed the attack so as to give Chiang a chance to enter into negotiations but, given that Mao was intent on taking Beijing and made no serious effort to offer terms to the GMD, this explanation seems unlikely. Whatever the reasons for the delay, by 14 January 1949 it was all over. On that day Lin Biao, in accordance with Mao's order, launched the assault on Tianjin. It was another bloody affair. The NRA troops under Chen Changjie, the Nationalist commander in the city, fought tenaciously and courageously through the day and into the night. But with no prospect of reinforcements coming to their assistance, there was little real chance they could hold on. On the dawn of the 15 January, Chen Changjie told his men to lay down their arms. He then formally surrendered.

There was now nothing to stop the PLA from taking Beijing. The only issue was whether the Nationalists would go down fighting to defend it. By the time Tianjin fell, PLA detachments had already occupied many of Beijing's outlying suburbs, meeting only token resistance. There was a strange atmosphere in the city itself. Everyone knew that carnage might soon follow but life seemed to go on as usual; packed trams rattled along, shops and cinemas stayed open, people went to work. There was not the desperate rush to leave that had produced the panic-stricken scenes in other

threatened cities. It may have been this that helped persuade Fu Zuoyi to negotiate rather than fight. In truth, he needed little persuading. The talks he held with PLA spokesmen clearly indicated that the Communists were prepared to smash their way mercilessly into Beijing. The only alternative, they told him, was for all of his 200,000 troops to vacate the city. On 16 January Fu accepted the ultimatum and ordered his forces to prepare to leave. He added that he no longer recognized the authority of the Nationalist government in Nanjing to rule China.

On 31 January the Communist takeover of Beijing began. In a great triumphal display, thousands of troops marched, rode or drove through the city. An American observer, Derk Bodde, noted that the procession took an hour to pass him. He counted over 250 heavy motor vehicles of every type: 'tanks, armoured cars, truckloads of soldiers, trucks mounted with machine guns, trucks towing heavy artillery, innumerable ambulances, jeeps, and other smaller vehicles'. Bodde believed he was witnessing 'probably the greatest demonstration of Chinese military might in history'. What amazed him was that it was 'primarily a display of *American* military equipment, virtually all of it captured or obtained from Guomindang sources'.

The taking of Beijing by the PLA marked the climax of a remarkable period. In scarcely more than four months the Communists had won three overwhelming victories. They had driven the GMD from northern China and were now poised to extend their authority over the whole of the country. In a dramatic reaction, Chiang Kai-shek acknowledged his responsibility for the Nationalists' humiliation by resigning. In Nanjing on 21 January, knowing that Beijing had fallen – a loss that confirmed the failure of the Nationalist strategy he had insisted on – he handed over authority to Li Zongren, his vice-president.

Yet while Chiang had honoured the Chinese tradition of performing self-abasement following failure, it had been but a gesture. He did not genuinely intend giving up his power within the Guomindang. This could be read between the lines of his resignation statement in which he declared that Li Zongren 'will act for me', a clear indication that Chiang still regarded himself as retaining the ultimate authority in the party. In all his subsequent actions he behaved as before. He kept the title Generalissimo and continued to consult and direct the GMD's military commanders as if he were their leader, behaviour that they reciprocated by treating him as their chief.

Part of the PLA's victory parade through Beijing, 31 January 1949. The bulk of the vehicles were American in origin and captured from the GMD. The fall of the city, whose name was changed from Peking to Beijing, meant that the Communists effectively controlled the whole of northern China. (Cody Images)

PLA forces approaching Beijing, January 1949. The decision of the Nationalist commander, Fu Zuoyi, to abandon Beijing rather than defend it preserved the city physically and saved the lives of thousands. On the surrender of the city hundreds of NRA officers took their own lives by swallowing poison tablets. (akg-images/De Agostini Picture Library)

The final struggles, 1949

Following the Pingjin campaign, the remainder of the war had an air of inevitability about it. Fierce struggles would still take place, but at best the Nationalists were engaged in delaying actions. Chiang Kai-shek continued to urge his forces to defend their remaining positions on the mainland, but it was clear he no longer believed that the Communists could be prevented from taking the whole of China. What followed was, in effect, a slow surrender. Since both the USA and the Soviet Union had now rejected any notion that they might come directly to the GMD's aid, Chiang's thoughts turned to Taiwan, a large island 90 miles from the mainland, as a refuge from which he could rebuild his party and his own power.

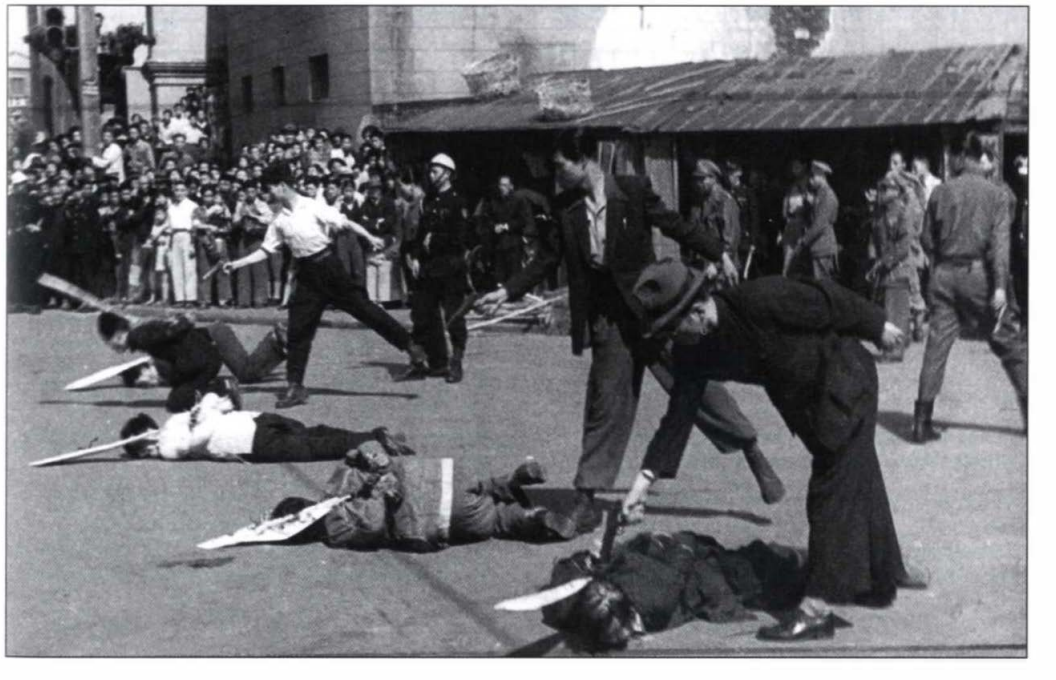
It was true that the Nationalist experience in Taiwan had so far been a turbulent one. Having been under Japanese colonial rule since 1895, the Taiwanese had regarded the Nationalists' arrogant reclaiming of the island in 1945 as the replacement of one oppressive regime by another. They deeply resented being treated as if they had been collaborators. Under direct instruction from Chiang, the NRA forces violently ousted the local people from their houses, shops and businesses, and denied them any say in government. In frustration, the Taiwanese in February 1947 mounted a large-scale demonstration in Taipei, the island's capital, only for it to be crushed bloodily by the Nationalist forces, who killed over 10,000 of the protestors. Now, with the physical resistance of the islanders broken, Taiwan became an obvious haven and base for the Nationalists in the increasingly likely event of their being defeated on the mainland.

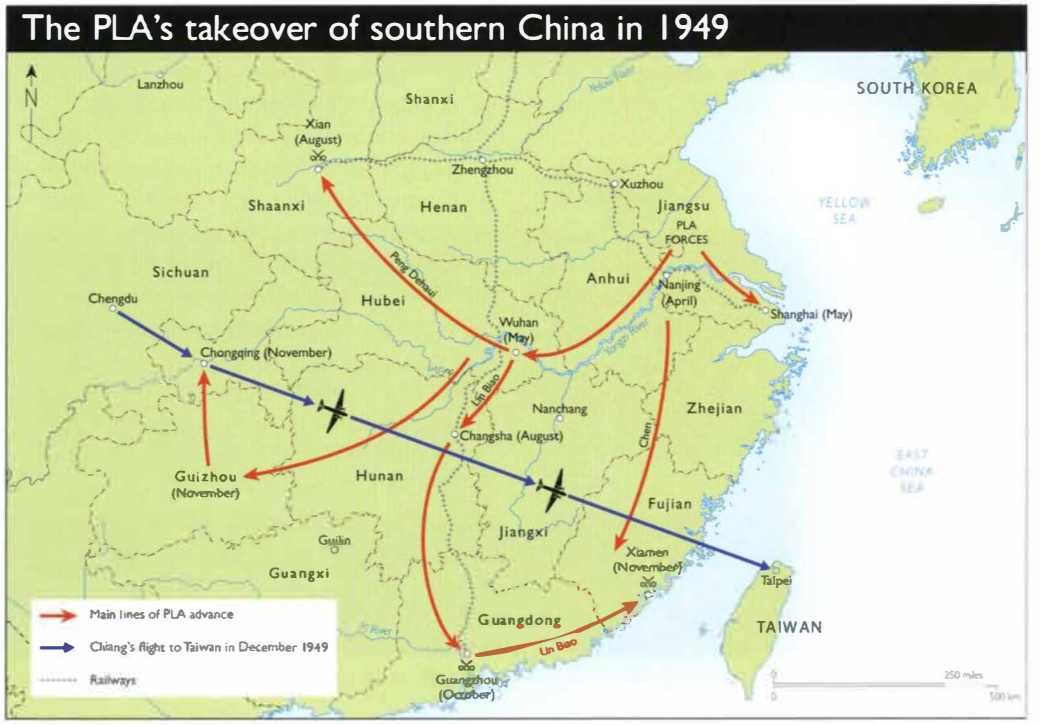
Chiang had left Li Zongren the unenviable task of defending the indefensible in China while he prepared to reconstruct his regime in Taiwan. Chiang wanted such Nationalist cities as Nanjing and Shanghai to hold out for as long as possible, not because he believed they could be permanently saved, but because he wanted time to transfer as many financial and material assets as possible from those cities to Taiwan. For similar reasons he refused to send reinforcements to Nanjing – he wanted to transfer GMD armies intact to Taiwan.

Nanjing fell in April 1949 and Shanghai a month later. Before their fall the Nationalist cities became chaotic and violent places. In Nanjing, looting was commonplace as ordinary people, desperate for anything they could lay their hands on, sacked the premises vacated by self-serving officials, who tried to commandeer the last transports to leave the city. Sometimes the police brutally attacked the looters; sometimes they joined them. In a desperate bid to hold on to Shanghai, the fanatical Nationalist governor, Tang Enbo, ordered execution squads to operate on a daily basis. In scenes reminiscent of Berlin in the last months of World War II in Europe, gangs of soldiers went round executing inhabitants who dared suggest that the fight against the CCP was a lost cause.

Yet such murderous zeal was not matched at the higher levels of the GMD's command. Too many of Chiang's military had resigned themselves to eventual defeat. This did not stop others continuing to show commitment, but the organized leadership that was required if the Nationalists were to save any part of mainland China never materialized. Chiang continued to issue orders but, since these often conflicted with those given by Li Zongren, the result was uncertainty and bewilderment among the defenders. Li said in exasperation that he wished Chiang would either take over full command or leave mainland China. When Chiang, who had came to Shanghai intent on stiffening resistance, realized the imminent PLA onslaught would be unstoppable, he slipped away and sailed for Taiwan for temporary respite. The taking of the city involved relatively little fighting. There were pockets of resistance but since Mao, keen to conserve his forces, made no great effort to cut off the fleeing troops who rushed from Shanghai, casualties were light compared to the bloodletting that had occurred in other cities.

Shanghai witnessed a reign of terror before it fell. It was a common sight for suspected Communist sympathizers to be executed in the street by a shot to the back of the head. Before they left the city, the Nationalists transferred millions of dollars in gold and silver bullion to Hong Kong. (© Paul Popper/Popperfoto/Getty Images)





The fall of Nanjing and Shanghai coincided with another of the great symbolic events of the civil war, the crossing of the Yangzi by the Communists. In Chinese tradition the Yangzi, the nation's greatest river, was a life source. Moreover, for the Communists to control it meant that it was no longer the physical barrier that had hitherto defined the extent of their power. So significant was it as a symbol that some Nationalists had suggested it should be treated as a moat guarding the entrance to southern China, which had always been the GMD's strongest base. The PLA crossing should, therefore, be prevented at all costs. Yet in the event, the Nationalist resistance melted away. Deng Xiaoping expressed his surprise: 'We did not encounter fierce resistance anywhere. Nearly all our 300,000 men crossed the river in a 24-hour period, plunging the enemy troops into chaos – they fled helter skelter.'

It was the Chinese Communists' control of the Yangzi that led to Britain being directly caught up in the civil war, in what became known as the Yangzi incident. On 20 April 1949 a PLA mortar battery on the north bank of the Yangzi opened fire on HMS *Amethyst*, a British warship en route from Shanghai to Nanjing to give protection to the British Embassy there. The shelling killed over 40 of the crew and caused the ship to run aground. After it attempted to return fire, *Amethyst*'s guns were knocked out of action. After 100 days, during which it sat with PLA guns trained on it, in July the ship was able to slip away and make the 100-mile journey downriver to safety. The British press described the affair as a final triumph, since despite the 40 deaths the ship's captain had defied the PLA's demand that he apologize for violating Chinese waters. However there was little doubt that the Chinese Communists had shown restraint. Given the position of the *Amethyst* it would have been blown out of the water if the PLA batteries had chosen to continue their shelling.

After the Yangzi had been crossed, key GMD bases continued to fall regularly to the PLA as it pushed into the southern provinces; Changsha fell in August, and Ghangzhou in October. It was on 1 October that Mao publicly declared that the civil war had been won. On the balcony of the Forbidden City in Beijing he announced to the world that 'China has stood up' and that a new nation, the Communist People's Republic of China, had come into being. His confidence was justified; although

PLA cavalry troops crossing a bridge on their entry into Shanghai in May 1949. (Cody Images)

In April 1949, with the war going disastrously for him, a disconsolate Chiang Kai-shek paid what he knew would be his last visit to his ancestral home in Xikou in Zhejiang province. Before leaving, he had knelt for hours weeping alone beside his mother's tomb.

resistance continued, there was now no possibility of the Nationalist regime surviving on the mainland. As ever, the character of the resistance depended on the dedication and determination of the resistors, particularly on how well they were led. A recurrent problem in the last months of the war was the tension between Li Zongren and Chiang. So divided were the two men that they deliberately avoided contact and correspondence. There were even suggestions among some of the embittered NRA generals that Chiang should be arrested and held in custody to prevent him causing disruption.

The Nationalists made a last stand in Chongqing, which they declared was now the nation's capital – as it had been in the last

Portrayed in the British media as a courageous escape, HMS *Amethyst*'s survival was presented by the Communists as an act of magnanimity on their part. They claimed that, having taught Britain a lesson by demonstrating that foreign interference would not be tolerated, they had allowed the *Amethyst* to go free. (IWM A30156)

years of the Japanese war. As had occurred in Nanjing and Shanghai, the Nationalist defenders often fought viciously among themselves as the Communist forces approached. Li Zongren, knowing that Chiang had gone to Chongqing in an effort to rally the troops there, deliberately refused to come to the city's aid. In any case, Chiang did not stay long. When he realized that, with Deng Xiaoping's forces poised to attack, the position was hopeless, he fled to Chengdu only to find that that city, too, was about to be attacked. On 10 December Chiang escaped by plane from Chengdu to Taiwan. He was never to set foot on mainland China again. Sporadic fighting continued, but what the PLA was now engaged in was a series of mopping-up operations. Although no formal end to the war was ever declared, if any one event can be said to have marked the end of the Chinese Civil War it was Chiang Kai-shek's flight to Taiwan.

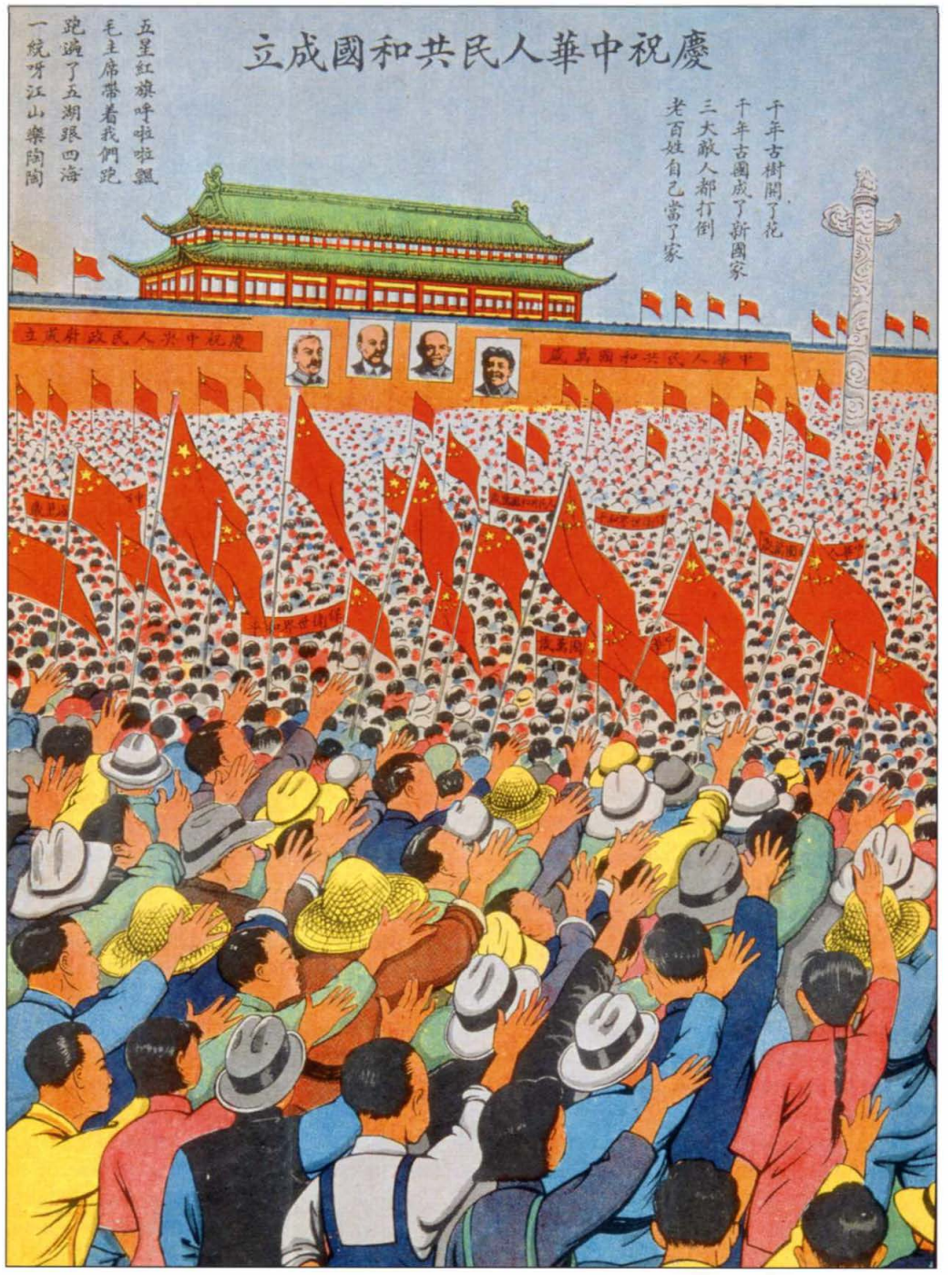
Western China

Chiang and the Nationalists faced a perennial ethnic and religious problem in China's most westerly states, Tibet and Xinjiang, which were areas larger in size than western Europe. In Tibet, the great majority of the population were adherents of the Lama faith, a branch of Buddhism. In Xinjiang most were Muslims. The Tibetans were ethnically and culturally distinct from the Han race, which made up 90 per cent of the population of China. Equally different from the Han were the Uighur, Kazakh, Hui and Kirghiz races of Xinjiang. Neither of the two warring sides in the civil war were welcome in these two western states but it was Chiang who had the greater problem. A Xinjiang

Communist forces crossing the Yangzi in April 1949. The PLA's gaining control of China's greatest river marked a crucial stage in the defeat of the Nationalists, since, in addition to it being a great symbolic victory, it also opened up southern China to the advance of the PLA. (Cody Images)

resistance movement developed, which Chiang pacified to some extent by promising some degree of local autonomy. Nevertheless, such was the concern that the province could flare up at any time that 100,000 Nationalist troops were stationed there throughout the civil war. Similar tensions existed between Chiang's government and Tibet, and although any military threat to the Nationalists from the region was minimal, the presence of alienated peoples in the west was a constant reminder of how fractured Chiang Kai-shek's hold over China was.

The position was to be violently resolved after Chiang had been defeated. In 1950 the armies of what was now the People's Republic of China undertook a series of carefully planned 'pacification' campaigns, which broke the meagre military resistance that Tibet and Xinjiang could muster and imposed Communist control. Yet six decades later the separatist movements within the two provinces still presented a challenge to Beijing's authority.



A Communist propaganda poster of 1949, declaring 'Progress Under Mao Zedong' and claiming that the Red Army and the people had come together under Mao to end poverty, ignorance and privilege. Such visual images were in early 1949 a sign of the CCP's growing confidence that victory was soon to be theirs. (akg-images/Erich Lessing)

Press gangs and coercion in the Civil War

For much of the civil war, the situation of China's peasants was desperate. Contrary to the promises of the warring parties' propaganda, the ordinary Chinese found themselves to be mere helpless victims of the Nationalists' and Communists' struggle for power. In their attitudes towards the peasantry, both the PLA and GMD were capable of treating the people they claimed to be fighting for as unworthy of either clemency or understanding. As a GMD police chief bluntly stated, 'The Chinese masses are used to cruelty; they understand it, they have always understood it.' The widespread existence of such views helps to explain why both parties in the civil war were so ready to indulge in violence – not simply against the enemy, but also against their own kind.

The terror and misery that the practice of forced recruitment brought to China's peasants is illustrated by the fate of Lao Deshan, a 16-year-old living in Guillin province, whose experience was recorded by members of one of the International Red Cross teams working in China during the civil war.

Lao's ordeal began in February 1947 when an NRA recruiting gang came to his village, searching the houses and scouring the countryside to pick up any young men unlucky enough not to have hidden themselves or run away. Since members of the squad received payment or extra rations for every conscript they brought in, they had a strong incentive to become ruthless bounty hunters.

When Lao heard the soldiers were on their way, he had taken to the nearby hills where he would have been safe. But his filial loyalty betrayed him. He was close enough to his house to hear the screams when the soldiers began to mistreat his mother, and it was her cries that brought him out of hiding. When he reached the house he was stopped by soldiers at the door. When he told them he was the the family's eldest son, they grabbed him by the hair and arms and forced him into the one-roomed house.

Inside were three officers. One of them had grabbed his mother by the hair and was forcing her head back. She stopped struggling and became silent at Lao's entry. The first officer let go of his mother and seized hold of Lao's collar with one hand. With the other hand he began to methodically slap the boy across the face with his open palm, cursing him for daring to hide himself. When Lao's mother tried to intervene, the officer hurled her to the earthern floor with a sweep of his free hand. The walls of the tiny room shook. Lao begged the soldiers to leave his mother alone. The officer agreed, on condition that Lao came quietly.

As a resigned Lao allowed himself to be led ouside, his mother pleaded hysterically with the soldiers, telling them that her husband had already died in the war and that Lao was the only one of her sons who was able to work the land. She begged them to realize that without him she and her four younger children would all starve, as she could not run the household on her own. She told the soldiers they were worse than the Japanese but it was to no avail.

Lao was bundled outside and led to a group of young peasants who had also been rounded up from neighbouring villages. They all had their hands tied in front of them and they were attached to the saddles of three mounted soldiers by long ropes.

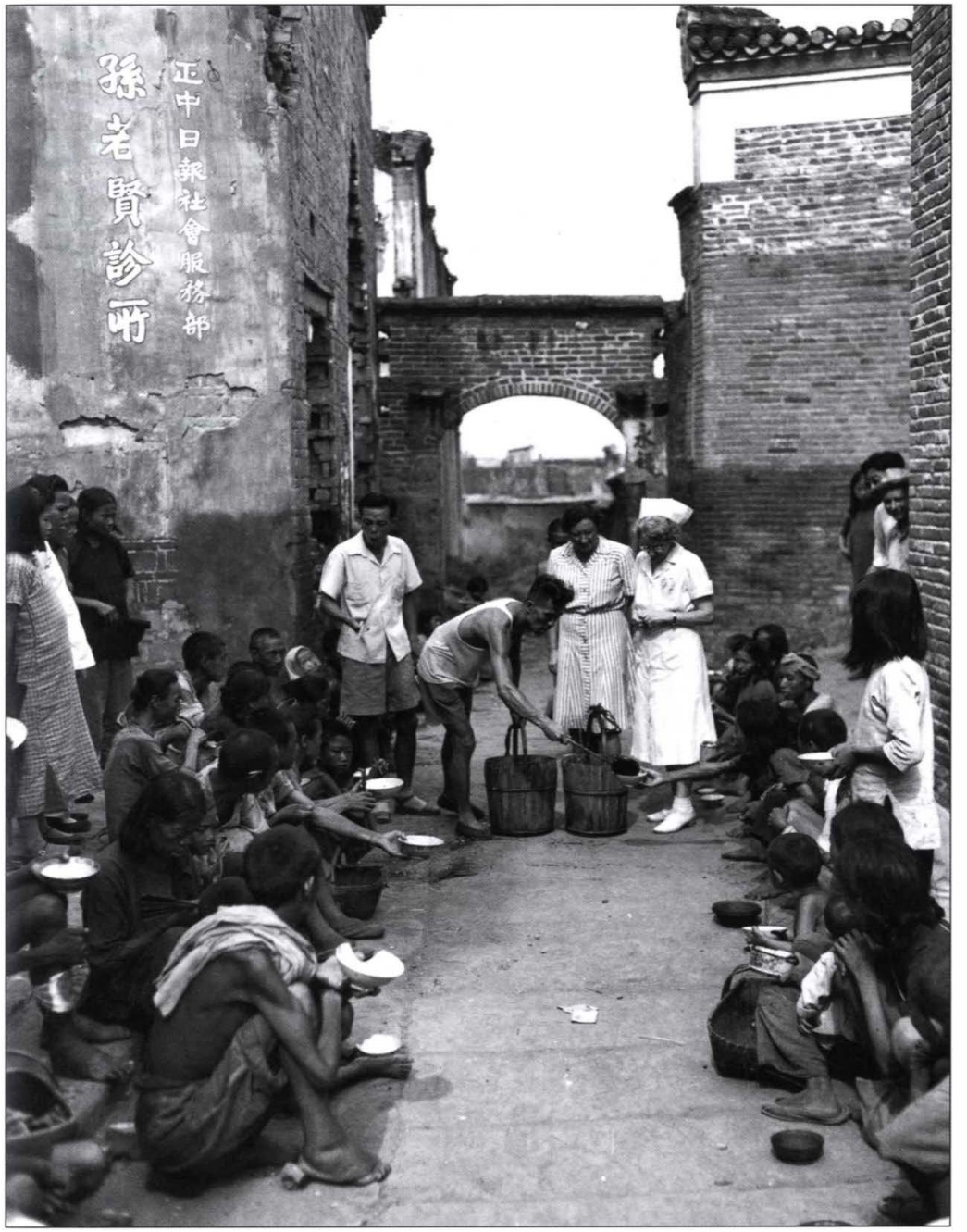
Chinese refugees living in caves. Such dwellings, carved out of hillsides, were typical of the accommodation the Communists had built for themselves at Yanan in the 1930s and 1940s. Though primitive in appearance, the caves offered effective shelter and protection. (Cody Images)

Lao was similarly bound. Accompanied by the wailing and the continued pleading of the village women folk, the six tethered lads were led off down the dusty road.

It was the practice of the recruiting squads to keep those whom they had rounded up so frightened that they would not dare to try to get away. Kicks and blows accompanied all given orders, and the recruits' ropes were never untied – not even at night. They had to relieve themselves to order, standing or squatting in unison. The recruiting squads were made up of hardened men who had themselves suffered this type of forced recruitment and ill-treatment, and violence begat violence. The march to the training camp took five days. During that time the only food Lao and the others had were mugs of congee – the drained-off water in which rice had been boiled.

Although there were humane commanders in Chiang's armies, who led crack regiments, Lao's experience of the NRA was not untypical. Too often brutality reigned, particularly in the later stages of the war when the situation was bleak for the Nationalists. So desperate was the NRA to replenish its dwindling ranks that it resorted to ever-harsher methods of recruitment. Denied the necessary time to train the new troops effectively, commanders were obliged to conduct campaigns with men, who, whatever their individual courage and initiative, had simply not been adequately prepared or equipped for warfare.

Private Lao Deshan of the NRA 123rd Shanghai Regiment received only the most rudimentary training, which largely consisted of drill accompanied by bullying. His fellow trainees had warned him to keep his mouth shut when Sergeant Feng was around. For the first three days Lao had done so, but on the



Western nurses supervise the distribution of food to desperate civilians. During the civil war many American and European nurses and doctors stayed on in China to care for the local people. (© Arthur Rothstein/Corbis)

fourth day, when their ration of rice was cut yet again, hunger impelled him to point out to Feng that unless they received more food the recruits would be too weak to train, let alone fight. The sergeant's enraged response was to kick Lao violently in the stomach and order him out onto the parade ground.

There, for the next hour, he was made to perform an exhausting series of physical

exercises which included running round the perimeter of the rough parade ground holding his rifle above his head with his arms fully extended. Whenever he stopped or faltered, Sergeant Feng shouted insults and kicked or punched him. At the end of Lao's humilation, he was informed that if he ever complained again, his rations would be cut completely and he would join the ranks of the thousands of recruits who died during basic training.

But Lao did not die. By an effort of will he bore the verbal taunts, the physical abuse and the starvation diet. The deep homesickness which he had experienced in the early days after his press-ganging, and which had tempted him to thoughts of desertion whatever the consequences, was subsumed by an overwhelming craving for food. It was this that kept him in the training camp. At least in the camp there was some food, even if it was inadequate, whereas to desert would have been to choose death by starvation. Even if he evaded the squad sent out to recapture him, he knew he could not live off the endless, uninhabited, barren land that seemed to stretch for ever. During their long route marches, the recruits had been shown the bleached bones of those who had starved to death after deserting.

Lao's first real engagement in battle came when his foraging party was ambushed by a PLA unit. When the enemy opened fire on them from three sides, the officer leading Lao's unit told his troops to make a rapid retreat and regroup later. Lao turned and ran, inadvertently dropping his rifle in the process. He turned back with the thought of retrieving it, only to be told by one of his own men rushing past not to be crazy and just run. Lao did not need to be told again. He scrambled over rocks and through bushes and met up with most of his unit. By nightfall they had made their way back to their base camp.

The next morning Lao was charged with surrendering his weapon to the enemy. Given no opportunity to defend himself, he was consigned to serve in a penal battalion. A unit made up of deserters and those accused of cowardice, the penal battalion was giving such tasks as scouting ahead of the main forces to check for ambushes, crossing rivers and torrents to see whether they were fordable, and walking across unmapped minefields.

Yet the nearest that Lao came to death was not in a minefield but when he collapsed during a forced march and was left for dead in a ditch. He survived purely by chance – a Red Cross team travelling through Yunnan came across him and and resuscitated him. It was to them that he told his story. He had been marching for 14 days and had covered some 200 miles. No food had been provided for the journey, and the marchers were expected to forage. But the land was so devoid of vegetation and wildlife that there was nothing to live off. The soldiers became so weak from hunger and dehydration that their guards no longer bothered to tether them. Men fell in droves as they marched and were left to die. Lao later discovered the scale of the tragedy which he had barely escaped. Red Cross enquiries revealed that he was one of only 17 to have survived from the 700 who had set out on the march.

As the war turned in favour of the PLA, Mao and the Communists gained many converts from the Nationalists, who were unable to match the appeal of CCP propaganda. Nevertheless, although Chinese Communism was renowned for the idealism of its adherents, it, like Chiang's Nationalism, had its dark and vicious side. Drawn from the documentation gathered by organizations such as 'China Watch', a picture emerges of the difficulties faced by Party idealists attempting to reconcile their natural human feelings with some of the teachings and practices of the party. One such idealist was Ku Wongmei, a loyal and committed PLA soldier.

On joining the CCP in 1946, Ku had fully accepted that what distinguished right from wrong was that right behaviour advanced

the proletarian revolution, while wrong impeded it. Therefore to inflict pain on someone was perfectly right if that someone was an enemy of the people or was hiding information that the Party or the PLA needed. He had learned that at the Party study meetings. It had been to enforce these ideas that newcomers to the Party and new recruits to the PLA, including Ku, were summoned to attend a struggle session.

The session took place in a large barracks room that served as a torture chamber. Inside some ten wrongdoers had been trussed to an overhanging beam. Ku's first reaction was shock. He recognized half of these men as comrades with whom he had served, and he immediately felt uneasy at their humiliation. As if sensing Ku's doubts, the chief interrogator spoke. He asked all those assembled to remember that in this, as in all things, Chairman Mao had to be their guide. It was Mao who at critical moments in the Yanan years had implemented rectification movements to hunt down CCP members and Red Army soldiers whose actions threatened rebellion in the Party and mutiny in the army. On those occasions, Mao had authorized the use of torture in order to break suspects and elicit the truth. Now, according to the chief interrogator, was another such occasion.

The interrogator continued by emphasizing that it was all a matter of developing true class consciousness, and of overcoming false bourgeois sentimentality. Enemies of the people deserved to be punished if they persisted in their errors. They did not deserve sympathy. It was the people who mattered. That was why it was right to report on comrades who failed in their duty. What was it that Mao had written? 'We must never for a moment divorce ourselves from the masses. We must cherish the people.' This, the interrogator assured the watching PLA recruits, meant

Captured PLA soldiers in NRA uniforms, studying Nationalist texts. Both sides tried to convert prisoners to 'correct' political thinking by subjecting them to a mixture of threats and intense propaganda, a practice at which the Communists eventually proved far more successful given their greater self-belief and military dominance. (Philip Jowett)

A weeping PLA soldier listens to the tale of misery told to him by one of the people in a Communist-liberated area. Mao encouraged the PLA to identify with ordinary Chinese. It was through a mixture of sympathy and coercion that the Communists sought to take over the countryside. (Cody Images)

there could be no false loyalties for those whose great task was to liberate the people.

If any soldier did anything that dishonoured that task, his fellow soldiers must denounce him. The liberated areas that they had driven the Nationalists from could remain liberated only if they, as protectors of the people, were totally dedicated in performing their duties. Chief among a soldier's duties was, as Mao had said, to be ever watchful of his comrades. He must encourage his comrades when they met difficulties and explain things they did not understand. But, if a comrade persisted in expressing bad thoughts, this could not be tolerated as it would weaken their regiment and the whole Red Army. Feelings of friendship must not deter a soldier from informing on a comrade whose conduct betrayed their cause.

Ku accepted all this, but it did not ease his discomfort. When the torture began he had to force himself to look, and nausea crept over him. The punishments were graded. They began with the pulling out of fingernails with pliers. Those who confessed during this first stage were spared further suffering, but those who remained stubborn – or whose offences were thought to merit it – were then subjected to the second stage. Hung naked by their wrists from a beam, with their toes barely touching the floor, their bodies were burned with lighted incense sticks. Ku could not bear the smell of scorched flesh and the contorted writhings of the victims.

But it was not until the third stage, reserved for the hardest cases, that Ku finally broke down. On this occasion, only one of the accused had proved capable of withstanding what had been done to him. A gnarled veteran of the CCP's Long March, he refused to confess that he had plotted against Mao and opposed the Party line. Bloodied and burned, he was now forced onto his knees in front of a wooden table.

His arms were pulled forward and held, palms downward, on the table. A six-inch metal nail was then hammered through the back of each hand, transfixing him to the table. This was too much for Ku; he pushed his way through his comrades and ran from the room.

Once outside, he vomited violently and continuously. A comrade came over to him, punched him gently on the arm and told him to get over it. 'Remember what Chairman Mao said – "A revolution is not a tea party".'

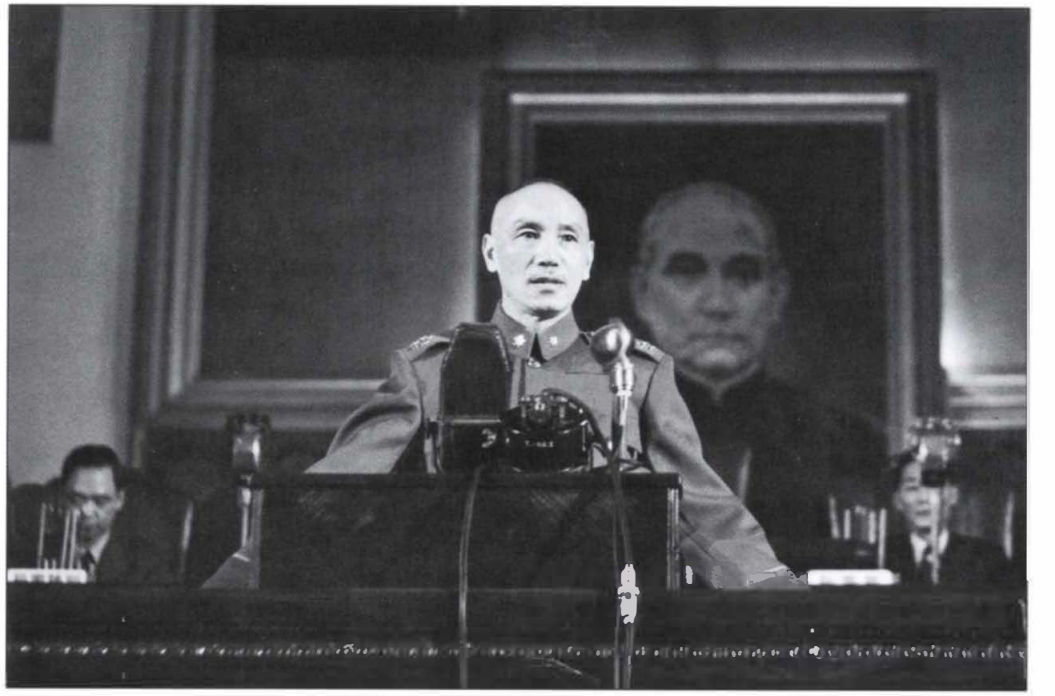
Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Zedong

Mao Zedong's record up to 1949 was a truly remarkable one. He had led a vast social revolution, had defeated the Japanese invaders and the Nationalists, and had created the People's Republic of China, the world's largest Communist state. Set against these successes, Chiang Kai-shek's record seemed barren. Having been the dominant force in China for over a decade, he lost the civil war and was driven from the mainland. It would be easy, therefore, to see Chiang's career up to this point as a failure. But that would be to overlook his very considerable achievements. Before his defeat in 1949, Chiang had become the embodiment of the Chinese nation, his name being recognized worldwide in a way that no previous Chinese leader's had. He had been the first modern Chinese statesman to come anywhere near establishing his country as an independent sovereign nation with a renewed sense of its own identity and the potential to become a world power.

Some of Chiang's apologists have pushed his claims much further. They argue that he was the first true modernizer of China, who was prevented from achieving his final goal of forging a united people and nation only by the invasion of the Japanese and the opposition of the Communist rebels. Mao and the CCP stole the victory that belonged rightly to Chiang. Other commentators are more critical; they suggest that Chiang was and remained essentially a warlord who, having risen to the top of the GMD by ruthless military means, intrigued and plotted with some of the worst elements in Chinese society in order to sustain himself in power. His dependence on devious relations with corrupt Chinese and foreign financiers effectively prevented him ever truly representing the Chinese people and rendered him incapable of pursuing the social transformation that originally inspired Sun Yatsen's Guomindang.

It is true that Chiang always spoke in terms of his party and government leading a moral revolution. In 1934 he had launched a 'New Life Movement', intended as a rejection of both Communism and Western capitalism and a reassertion of Chinese values of social harmony. But the narrow basis of his financial and political support and the demands of constant war meant he was very restricted in what he could do. This was particularly evident in the GMD's economic dealings in which, despite Chiang's supposed strictures, it took capitalism as the model – a decision that necessarily meant close and continuing association with Western commercial and financial interests.

Mao and Chiang came from similar social backgrounds. They were the sons of well-to-do peasant families. Both had been forced into arranged marriages that they refused to consummate and later rejected. Both had proved rebellious pupils and students. They also shared many personal characteristics. Both were hypochondriacs. When under stress, both showed signs of psychosomatic disorder: Chiang suffered recurrent nosebleeds, while Mao periodically gave way to bouts of depression. Neither man was easy to get on with. Though they had many acquaintances it is unlikely that either ever had close friends. Each had a strong puritanical streak. Where they differed was that Mao's puritanism was a thing of his youth, Chiang's of his adulthood. Mao become a libertine in his later years, as if to make up for his former abstinence when as a young man he had regarded women as a distraction from the important things in life. Chiang went in a reverse direction. Mortified by the discovery

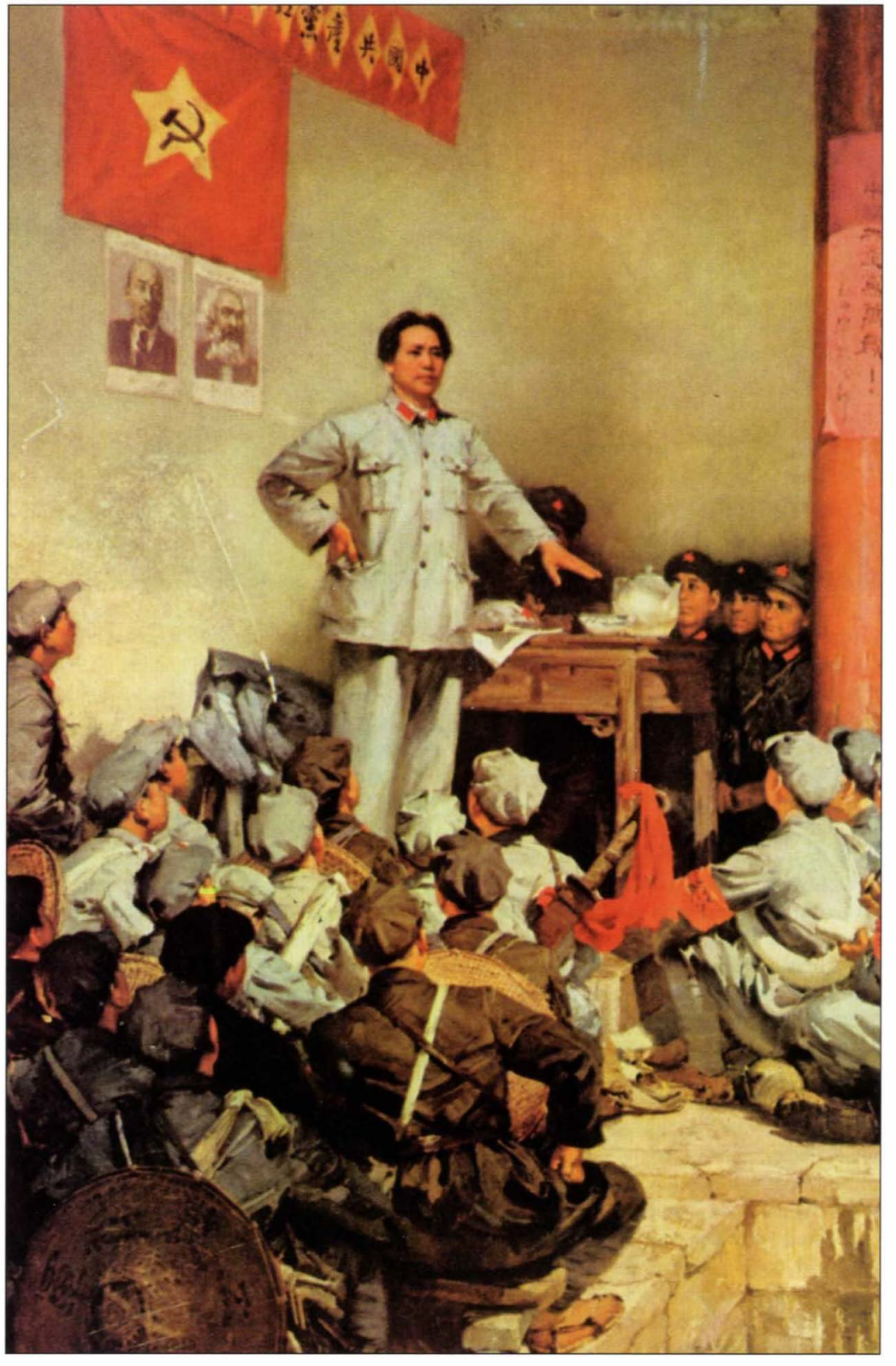


Standing in front of a huge portrait of Sun Yatsen, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek reports to 2,500 National Assembly delegates on the state of the Chinese nation. Chiang was formally installed as President of the Republic of China in May 1948 after being elected by the National Assembly. But, since the Assembly contained only Nationalists, it was hardly the conferring of real authority. By now, despite the trappings of power; Chiang was beginning to lose the civil war. (© Bettmann/Corbis)

at the time of his second marriage in 1921 that he had unwittingly infected his new wife with the gonorrhoea he had contracted in a drunken orgy in a Shanghai brothel, he vowed to abstain from alcohol and extra-marital sex, a promise that he seems largely to have honoured though he continued to have platonic affairs with other women.

As their conduct during the civil war illustrated, both Mao and Chiang were ruthless, but no leader in twentieth-century China could have afforded to be anything else. The lack of any mechanism in Chinese politics for the peaceable transference of power meant that violent struggle was the norm. Unless a claimant was prepared to be violent he could not gain or retain real authority. That was a basic truth in Chinese politics that both Mao and Chiang acknowledged and acted upon. Neither was above using strong-arm tactics, even torture in Mao's case. When suppressing a mutiny in the Red Army Mao had instructed his officers: 'Do not kill the important leaders too quickly, but squeeze out of them the information. From the clues they give, you can go on to unearth other leaders.'

How careless Chiang could be with the lives of civilians was clear in his decision to re-route the Yellow River in 1947. This massive dam project, aimed at dividing the CCP forces from their bases on the northern bank, resulted in nearly half a million people in some 600 villages being uprooted and left homeless. Chiang laid himself open to the charge that he was not genuinely interested in democracy by the way in which he hounded the Democratic League, a party set up in 1939 to offer a third way between the Nationalists and Communists and help unite China against the Japanese. Despite the League's conciliatory approach, Chiang declined to consider any form of merger unless the League subordinated itself totally to the Guomindang. There were suggestions



A Communist propaganda painting showing Mao addressing Red Army soldiers during the development of the Yanan base in the 1930s. (Library of Congress)

Chiang and Soong Meiling shortly before their marriage in 1927. Meiling, who was said to 'exude charm at every pore', contributed greatly to Chiang's advancement in Chinese and American moneyed society. However, this association with Western finance led to accusations that Chiang had sold out his revolutionary ideals to capitalism. (© Bettmann/Corbis)

that he was implicated in the assassination of two of the League's leading figures, Wen Yiduo and Li Gongpu. Although the rumours were never substantiated, the murders provided the Communists with a useful propaganda weapon to use against Chiang and the GMD.

The suffering that Chiang presided over was more a consequence of culpable neglect – as with the wretched treatment meted out to recruits to the NRA – than of planned brutality. Of course, huge numbers died during the civil war and charges could be levelled against both leaders that their strategies were responsible for the deaths of millions. But that in itself does not prove that Mao and Chiang willed those fatalities. What can be said is that the two men exhibited the indifference to people's suffering that was habitual among Chinese leaders.

While it is appropriate to describe Mao Zedong as a Chinese Marxist, the stress should be on the adjective rather than the noun. Throughout his political career Mao's first objective was the furtherance of the interests of China, not the pursuit of international revolution. Indeed, one of his major political achievements was to redefine and restructure Communist theory to make it fit the Chinese context. Mao once said in his earthy, peasant way that only the Chinese 'with their arses planted firmly in the soil of their native land' could truly understand China. His determination that the Chinese must follow their own path was a reaction against the Soviet Union's attempt to dictate to the CCP.

It is noteworthy how little practical experience Mao had of international relations. True, he was widely read in translated foreign works, but, aged 52 in 1945, he had never been out of China and thus had none of the real knowledge of the

world that marked the cosmopolitan Zhou Enlai, his ablest colleague and future foreign minister. Chiang in contrast had lived in Japan and Russia and, through his third wife, Soong Meiling, whom he wed in 1927, was increasingly introduced to Western ways. Meiling, who had graduated from an American university and was the sister of the financier T.V. Soong, China's richest man, became for Chiang what might be called an indispensable liability. Chiang knew only a few English words and was dependent on her when negotiating with the Western allies. He could not do without Meiling but she occasioned great scandal. Beautiful and vivacious, she used her femininity to great effect and turned heads wherever she went. She often acted as Chiang's representative and there is little doubt that the Western press fell in love with her. She was said to have seduced many members of the American delegations in China, all in the cause of advancing her husband's career. Obsessively fastidious, Meiling would never sleep twice in the same set of bedsheets and insisted on gold taps being fitted in her bathrooms.

Jiang Qing photographed with Mao at Yanan in 1938, shortly after she became his third wife. Their tempestuous marriage survived until Mao's death in 1976. Although Jiang's prominence as Mao's wife seemed to confirm the CCP's official recognition of female equality, in practice women were seldom treated as equals in the party. (akg-images/ullstein bild)

Interestingly, their marriage produced no children. It was rumoured that this was because Chiang, having sired a son with a previous wife, made it a condition of marrying Meiling that their relationship would be a celibate one. They preferred playing croquet or draughts together or listening to American big-band records on a wind-up gramophone. This homely picture sits oddly with Chiang's reputation as someone who had previously enjoyed several affairs. But his womanizing apart, Chiang had few other personal vices. Indeed, the irony of his leadership was that while his government and party became associated with corruption and excess he personally led an upright life in accordance with his own brand of ascetic Christianity and Buddhism.

Arguably the only woman on whom Mao ever depended was his mother, a saintly long-suffering Buddhist. It is true he wrote love poems of some poignancy to his second wife, but this did not stop him abandoning her and taking a third wife, Jiang Qing, whom he came to loathe but for some reason never abandoned. Jiang later proved a formidable figure in Chinese politics.

The Chinese have been described as natural dialecticians, believers that life is essentially a struggle between opposites. Both Chiang and Mao were firm in their conviction that compromise was not a solution to any of China's major problems. Complete victory over opponents was the only option, both politically and militarily. The upbringing of the two antagonists was very similar. They had grown up in a China torn by crisis and upheaval, where strength was admired and weakness despised. The violence that was a constant feature of Chinese history was not an accidental accompaniment to political action; it was a definition of what politics was. At its most basic, politics in twentieth-century China was a matter of one claimant for power trying to destroy all elements of opposition. Absent was any democratic notion of legitimate opposition or government by consent.

Whatever the subtleties of the ideas they espoused, the movements that Chiang and Mao led ultimately took their character from the embracing of force as the only arbiter in public affairs. Hence the savagery of the 1945–49 civil war.

The roles of the Soviet Union and the USA

Since the dates of the Chinese Civil War coincided with the first years of the Cold War there is an understandable tendency to see it as a microcosm of that larger international struggle. However it was never a simple matter of the Soviet-backed Communists versus the American-backed Nationalists. The relationship of the Chinese parties with the two major powers was a more complex affair.

The Soviet Union and China

Mao regarded Stalin's policies towards China as being deliberately devious. He had strong grounds for thinking so. At the end of the Pacific War, rather than assisting the CCP in seizing the territory now relinquished by the Japanese, Stalin, under the terms of the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship agreed with Chiang's GMD government, had allowed thousands of Nationalist troops to pour into Manchuria. Stalin urged Mao to show restraint and to enter into talks with Chiang Kai-shek. Since this was what the USA was also advocating, Mao reluctantly agreed. Even after the GMD–CCP talks had broken down, Stalin still declined to commit himself unequivocally to the Chinese Communists. Early in 1946, much to Mao's annoyance, the Soviet Union announced that it still desired 'to assist the Nationalist government to establish its power in the north-east'.

However, Stalin then made a shift of policy. Both as a sop to Mao and as a way of preventing the Nationalists fully controlling Manchuria, he instructed the local Soviet commanders to hand over to the CCP forces large numbers of weapons captured from the Japanese. But then, in another policy zigzag, Stalin commanded the Chinese Communists to abandon the territory they had taken in northern China. To enforce this demand, Soviet commanders in China threatened to turn their weapons against those CCP detachments that refused to obey. Peng Zheng, one of Mao's divisional officers, commented on the bitter irony of 'the army of one Communist party using tanks to drive out the army of another!' The Chinese Communists were understandably often bewildered by Soviet behaviour. They were as likely to be turned on as enemies as they were to be treated as Marxist brothers.

The determining factor in the Soviet attitude towards the civil war was that Stalin did not believe in the possibility, still less the desirability, of the Communists ruling the whole of China. In April 1948 he was still urging Mao's CCP to enter a coalition and not attempt to govern on its own. He appealed to Mao to think in terms of a 'national revolutionary-democratic government, rather than a Communist one'. Mao rejected the notion. Yet Stalin persisted. When Chiang, faced by the disastrous reverses that his armies were suffering in the autumn campaigns of 1948, asked both the Americans and the USSR to renew their roles as peace brokers, Stalin suggested that Mao should be prepared to consider a CCP–GMD settlement.

Again Mao declined to listen. In a 1949 New Year's Day broadcast he dismissed Chiang and the GMD as 'snake-like scoundrels who deserved no pity'. In a telegram to Stalin, he told him that the war was running 'irreversibly' in the CCP's favour and that by the summer the PLA would be in a position to cross the Yangzi and take the war into southern China. In April 1949, as the PLA forces prepared to make Mao's prophecy a reality, Stalin again interfered. He sought to frighten Mao by suggesting that if the PLA did cross the Yangzi this might well excite intervention by the Americans, who would not tolerate a China totally controlled by the Communists. Stalin proposed that Mao accept the partitioning of China along the Yangzi, which would leave a Communist north and a Nationalist south. Mao, however, once more refused to be instructed. He judged that Stalin was primarily concerned not with the USA's reaction but with preventing a united Communist China from rivalling the Soviet Union. Mao later recorded: 'When we were about to cross the Yangzi River, Stalin still wanted to prevent us. According to him, if we did so, America would send troops to China. I did not listen to what he said. We crossed the Yangzi. America did not send troops.'

Ambiguous as it appeared, there was an underlying consistency in Stalin's approach to the Chinese Civil War. As Mao had correctly sensed, Stalin's abiding concern was to keep China divided. A China ineffectively controlled by Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalists was far more to Stalin's taste than a committed, united Communist China under Mao Zedong. It chimed with his preference for a weak, unchallenging state as a Far Eastern neighbour. Preoccupied as he became with Cold War machinations in Europe, the last thing Stalin wanted was a resurgent and threatening China on the Soviet Union's 4,000-mile Asian borders.

Stalin looks on as Molotov signs the Treaty of Friendship between the Soviet Union and Chiang's Chinese Republic, 14 August 1945. Chiang's hope was that the alliance with the Soviet Union would give him a free hand to crush the Chinese Communists. For his part, Stalin wanted Manchuria's industrial resources. (© Bettmann/Corbis)

Major personal and ideological considerations also shaped Stalin's attitude. He was disturbed by the thought that if the CCP triumphed Mao's China might well come to challenge the Soviet Union's leadership of international Communism. Differences over the meaning of Marxism and how it should be applied in China had bedevilled relations between Mao and Stalin since the 1920s. They had not acted in a spirit of Marxist brotherhood. Stalin had been unwilling to accept that a peasant-based movement, such as Mao was leading, could be genuinely revolutionary. The Marxist rules of class war dictated that

true proletarian revolution had to be urban-based. Although Stalin was quite prepared to ignore Marxist dialectics when they did not fit the Soviet situation, he was rigidly dogmatic when applying them outside the USSR. This long-standing political rivalry was intensified by the mutual distaste the Soviet and Chinese leaders felt towards each other. Stalin much preferred negotiating with Chiang than with Mao, whom he considered an opinionated upstart.

China and the USA

In the 1950s there was much bitterness among Americans over what was termed the 'loss' of China. The charge was that the USA, despite having invested heavily in time, diplomacy and resources in China, had allowed it to fall to Communism. Stalin, the argument ran, had outmanoeuvred the USA and, using Mao as a puppet, had established China as a Soviet satellite in Asia. The establishment of the PRC was thus one of Stalin's great Cold War triumphs. Mao's Soviet-backed victory had helped create a vast Communist empire reaching from eastern Europe to the Pacific. It is understandable why in the recriminatory atmosphere of the McCarthy era such an interpretation should have taken hold. But it is a view that few analysts would now accept. We now know that Mao was far from being Stalin's puppet and that Stalin had no wish to see China become a powerful Communist state.

The attitude of the United States officials in China in 1945 had been far from hostile towards the CCP. This was because the Communists, like the GMD, had been military allies with the Americans since 1941 and also because Mao deliberately played down the CCP's politics. He stressed to the Americans that his party were agrarian reformers rather than political revolutionaries. This may have a temporary expedient but it certainly made many Americans feel well disposed towards the CCP at this stage. This respect was increased when Mao put forward a plan for a CCP–GMD coalition government to run China once Japan had been defeated. Negotiations followed over a number of months, with Patrick Hurley, the extrovert US Ambassador, giving his full support. When the talks broke down in March 1945 it was largely Chiang Kai-shek's fault; he let it be known that he was not prepared to accord the CCP parity with his own party.

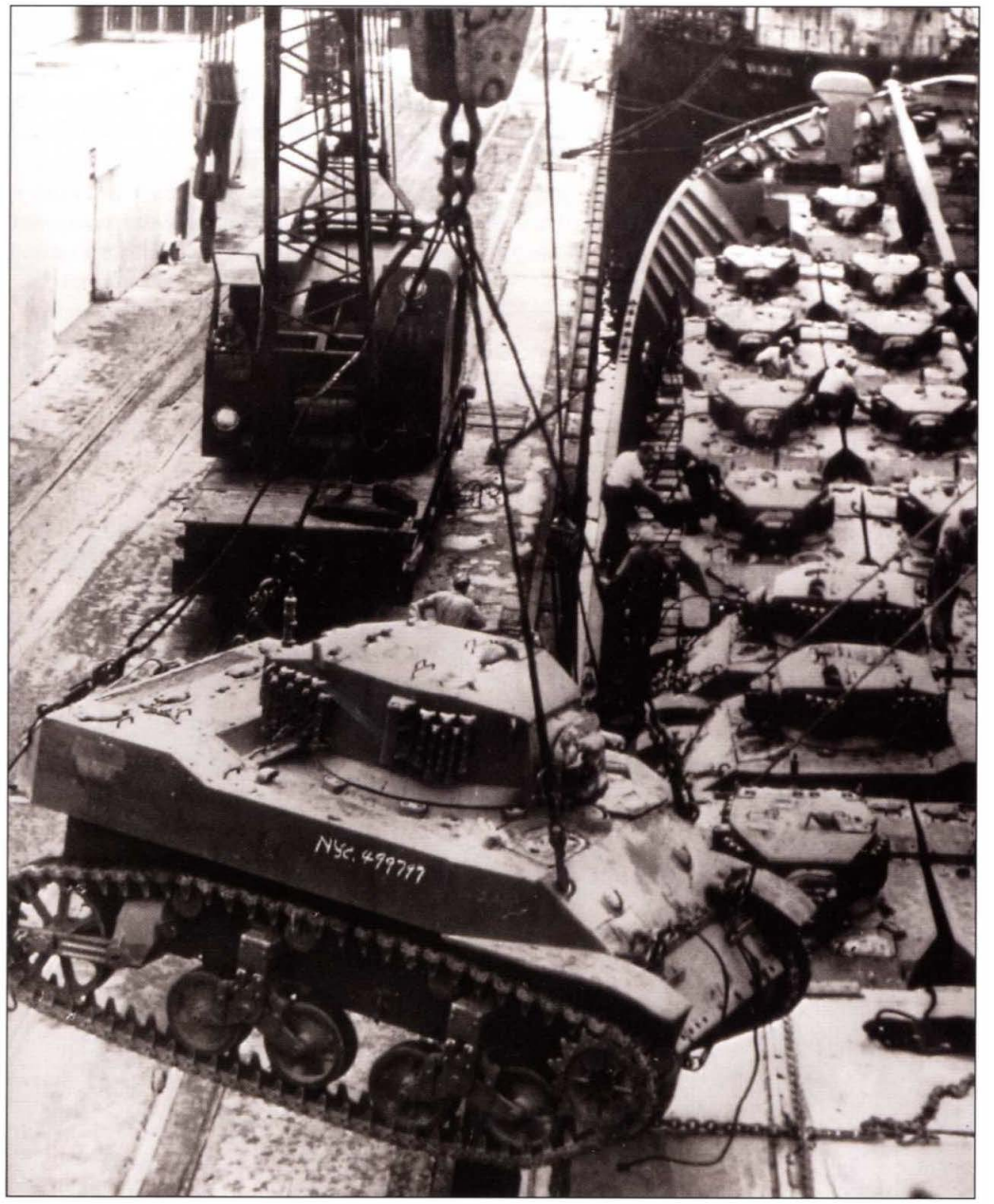
Nationalist troops boarding USAAF C-47 aircraft in the summer of 1945. At the end of the Pacific War the USA was keen to show its continued support for Chiang Kai-shek by flying his forces to take over the various areas in northern China where the Japanese were surrendering. (Cody Images)

The reaction this caused among the Americans revealed how seriously divided they were on the China issue. While Hurley would not openly criticize Chiang, a number of US officials were more frank. In reporting to the State Department, they referred back to the withering comments made in 1943 by General Stillwell, Chiang's American chief of staff. Stillwell had condemned the GMD as being chronically guilty of 'corruption, neglect, hoarding, black market, trading with the enemy'. Equally pertinently, Stillwell and his successor, General Wedemeyer, described the CCP as a genuine social and political force in China, one that could not, therefore, be left out of any settlement. It was such thinking that led George Marshall, appointed as President Truman's special China envoy in December 1945, to attempt to bring about a GMD–CCP settlement.

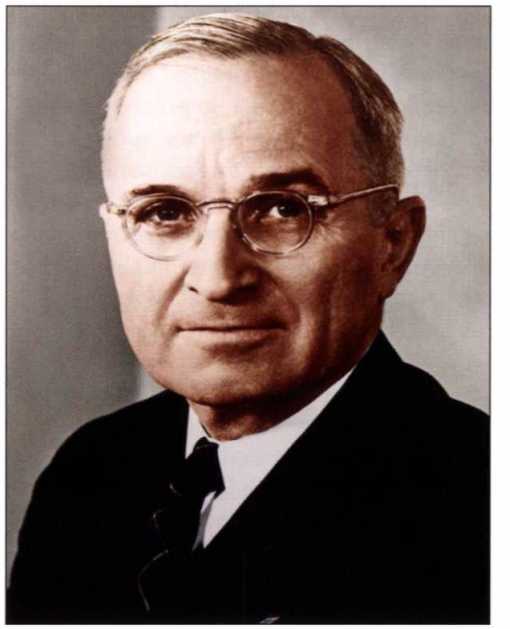
Interestingly, while in China Marshall took time to visit the Communist base at Yanan. Mao was careful to put on a good display, endeavouring to convince the Americans that the CCP were not rebels intent on overthrowing Chiang's legitimate government of China, but reformers concerned to improve the conditions of China's rural poor. The Communists were, Mao said, willing to co-operate in a joint Chinese venture, but it was the Nationalists who put barriers in the way. Marshall was sufficiently convinced by this line to report back favourably to Washington on the CCP's intentions. It also encouraged him to act tough with the Nationalists. On a number of occasions Marshall used the threat of withholding supplies to the GMD to oblige Chiang to accept at least a temporary halt in the fighting. This tended to favour the Communists since they used the

intermissions to strengthen the positions they held. Yet in the end Marshall's efforts to secure a settlement foundered when he found that he could not convince Chiang of the need for a compromise.

American M5 light tanks being loaded for China in 1949. The USA, despite its misgivings about Chiang Kai-shek's position and reliability, continued to give material aid to the Nationalists until the end. (Philip Jowett)



Manifestly, the USA had expended much goodwill and great diplomatic energy in China in the aftermath of the Japanese war. However, it is doubtful whether it would have stayed as long as it did in China after 1945 had the Cold War not imposed its larger concerns. It was the Americans' worry over how Stalin might use their absence to Soviet advantage that gave them pause and



Like many American officials, President Truman had a poor opinion of Chiang Kai-shek, but he never entirely abandoned the Nationalists. This was in part because of the pressure put on Truman by the Republican pro-Nationalist lobby in the US Congress. Cold War considerations dominated American thinking about China. (akg-images)

put back their formal withdrawal to 1947. That is why, exasperated with Chiang though they were, they never formally abandoned him, despite finally withdrawing their mission early in 1947. The Communists played on the continued American presence after the Japanese war had ended to suggest that Chiang Kai-shek was willing to sacrifice China's independence simply to shore up his own position. Chiang was never entirely happy with his reliance on the USA. He would have liked to continue playing off the Russians and the Americans against each other indefinitely.

It was also the case that, whatever its official intentions may have been, the USA's continued presence in China after 1945 damaged its reputation. Rather than creating stability, the presence of American forces in places such as Beijing, Shanghai and Tianjin sometimes made things worse. GIs were accused of arrogantly disregarding Chinese sensibilities in their dealings with locals. Charges were made that they molested females; a particular incident that caused outrage among the Chinese in 1946 was the alleged rape of a young woman in Beijing by two US marines. In July 1946 a motor column of American marines was ambushed by a Communist detachment outside Beijing. In the ensuing gun battle, four marines were killed and 12 others wounded. Despite strong diplomatic protests from the USA, little cooperation was offered by the local people and Chiang was unable to flush out the Communists thought to be responsible. It was such incidents and the failure to persuade the two Chinese sides to compromise that undermined any real hope that the USA could achieve its ends in China.

Despite the harsh criticisms of the GMD regime by many American experts in the field, it is not difficult to grasp why the USA persisted in supporting Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalists. By 1946 the USA had already committed huge resources to shoring up the GMD. Under a lend–lease scheme it had issued millions of dollars' worth of military equipment to the Nationalists. It had provided transport to carry over half a million GMD troops to the zones surrendered by the Japanese, an operation described by one American general as 'the greatest air and sea transportation in history'. In addition 55,000 US marines had been sent to the northern ports as 'military advisers' to the GMD. The USA judged that such an outlay made it impossible simply to write off its political and economic investment. The result was that it continued to finance and support Chiang and the Nationalists, despite the deep differences of opinion within the US government.

President Truman never had a high opinion of Chiang and the Nationalists, describing them as 'grafters and crooks'. In 1948 he pointedly declined to come to Chiang's rescue when the GMD leader appealed for direct assistance against the Communist advance. Indeed, Truman would have willingly washed his hands of the Nationalists. However, Cold War

concerns again intervened. In Congress the hardening of the Cold War produced a vocal China lobby, largely made up of Republicans, which argued strongly that the Nationalists – whatever their failings – were an Asian bastion against the spread of international Communism and therefore could not be deserted.

The curious outcome of all this was that when the Chinese Communists won the civil war in 1949 it was to the dismay of both of the two great powers. Mao's triumph confounded both the USA and the Soviet Union; it proved that Stalin had been wrong to underestimate the strength and durability of Chinese Communism and it showed that the USA had been wrong to swallow its doubts about Chiang and commit itself to the support of the Nationalists. Both the powers were left with the problem of trying to make the best of it. For two decades after 1949 the USA ignored political reality and pretended that Chiang's tiny island regime in Taiwan was the true Chinese nation, even entitled to take its seat as a permanent member of the UN Security Council. Forced by circumstance to acknowledge the PRC and publicly support it, since in Cold War terms it shared a common ideology, the Soviet Union under Stalin compensated by adopting a patronizing and exploitative approach towards Mao's China. This created a lasting bitterness among the Chinese that prevented there ever being a genuine partnership between the two Communist superpowers. Arguably, this division was one of the most significant factors in the ultimate victory of the West in the Cold War.

Why the war was won and lost

Given the GMD's superiority in 1946 in terms of military resources, the civil war was Chiang's to lose rather than Mao's to win. Although the struggle was often complex in its local detail, the overall story was relatively simple. It was essentially a matter of the CCP resisting the GMD's initial move to crush them and then taking the offensive. The major and deciding campaigns came after the GMD had been prevented from taking Manchuria and the north-east. This raises the very interesting question of whether Chiang sowed the seeds of his own defeat by following the wrong strategy.

Chiang's inability to maintain supplies to his forces in sufficient quantity exposed the mistake he had made in sending his major armies to Manchuria. In attempting to take the region, he had ignored the reservations of those of his military advisers who had warned him that to proceed with the plan would be to overextend his supply lines and make his forces vulnerable to counter-attack in a region of China that was both hostile and relatively unknown to the Nationalists.

Chiang was too eager to extend his control over the whole of China. Retrospect suggests that he would have had a far better chance of spreading his authority had he first consolidated his position in central and southern China, where his real strength lay, before moving north. By abandoning the controlled methods he had employed against the Japanese and rushing to defeat the CCP in Manchuria, he threw away an advantage that his greater troop numbers and resources initially gave him. Chiang's lack of strategic judgement was further evident in his decision in 1947 to pursue the ironically misnamed strongpoint offensive; intended to secure the north-eastern provinces for the GMD, it succeeded only in overstretching his armies at a time when they should have been regrouping and consolidating.

As the war progressed, the rivalry and jealousy among Chiang's generals were revealed as among the major weaknesses in the Nationalist army. Chiang also had a dangerous habit of appointing commanders according to their personal loyalty to him rather than their ability. More serious still was the readiness of key officers to act as Communist spies, leaking to the CCP details of Nationalist troop positions and movements.

With remarkable honesty and insight, Chiang himself in the last year of the war explained why his forces were losing to the enemy. He gave four principal reasons. The first was his military leaders' lack of tactical skill: 'Our commanders fight muddle-headed battles,' he said. He complained that they failed to study the opposing troop dispositions and took no account of the lie of the land. Their pre-planning was sketchy and they issued orders casually and thoughtlessly. His second reason was the poor treatment the rank and file received from their officers. The troops were inadequately trained; their knowledge of weapon use was sketchy; and they were not taught the rudiments of reconnoitring, manoeuvring, and maintaining lines of communication in the field. 'The soldiers' combat skills are so poor that they cannot fight.'

Chiang's third admission was that Nationalist morale was cripplingly low. 'It cannot be denied that the spirit of most commanders is broken and their morality is base,' he observed. He also noted the complacency of the high-level officers, many of whom had lost their revolutionary spirit and were concerned solely with self-interest.

Chiang levelled his fourth and arguably weightiest self-reproach against the GMD

itself as a political organization. Its work, he said, was done 'carelessly and perfunctorily'; the party lacked organization, discipline and effective propaganda, attributes in which, he acknowledged, Mao and the Communists excelled. In a later reflection in the 1950s, Chiang Kai-shek emphasized that his party's main weakness had been its lack of unity at critical times, exacerbated by Soviet interference and American irresolution.

But although these strictures showed how conscious Chiang was of his party's weaknesses and his enemy's strengths, he remained utterly convinced that the Guomindang was the only valid party for the Chinese nation. 'Our ideology, thought and political line are nevertheless definitely more correct than theirs and are moreover more suited to the needs of the nation.' That unwavering belief meant that nothing short of total victory was acceptable to him. It locked him into a struggle that became all or nothing. The result was that while for expedient reasons he appeared at times to be prepared to negotiate, in reality he was unwilling to accept any form of compromise settlement.

Yet while the list of the Nationalists' military limitations clearly goes a long way towards explaining their defeat, other factors were of considerable significance. A crippling political problem for Chiang Kai-shek was that his party never lived up to its own expectations. Sun Yatsen, the GMD's founder, had created it as a party of the people. That was the essence of its original appeal. However, although Chiang continued to assert that his was a truly popular revolutionary party, reality belied the claim. Famine was endemic in parts of China and although it is difficult to see how any government could have totally prevented it, the GMD's powerlessness in the face of its ravages further illustrated the emptiness of Chiang's claims that his government existed to end the poverty and hunger of the Chinese people.

Far from being a party of the people, the GMD under Chiang became a party of China's small social and political elite. It drew its support from the bankers and merchants of urban China, who tended either to despise or ignore the impoverished peasants of the countryside. The party depended on the donations and tax revenue that it derived from this numerically small but disproportionately influential class. A telling illustration of this was that 90 per cent of the revenue raised by the Nationalist government came from Shanghai, China's largest international port and money market.

The consequence was that the GMD government, reliant on deals with the shady elements in Chinese society, became essentially corrupt, gaining an unenviable but deserved reputation for nepotism and partiality. Such failings seemed all the more culpable in Nationalist China since they contradicted the principles on which the GMD government was avowedly based. In 1943 Chiang had written a celebrated book, *China's Destiny*, in which he called upon the Chinese people to suppress all selfish thoughts and join with his party in a great national movement of moral regeneration. Such an appeal rang increasingly hollow as China slipped further into decline and the interests of the ordinary Chinese were ignored.

It was not so much corruption itself that weakened the Nationalists as their failure to cultivate a power base among the regional elites. Corrupt but effective governments can survive; corrupt but ineffective governments cannot. A problem that had confronted all leaders of China since the days of the emperors was the difficulty of imposing and maintaining central government on the regions of such a vast country. The common response was for central authorities to do a deal with local powers. In return for formal recognition of its overall authority, the central government would agree to leave the local magnates free to control regional affairs. It was a compromise that suited both sides and it broke down only when one of them failed to keep to the bargain.

It was Chiang Kai-shek's fate to break this unwritten but established rule. By ignoring the traditional compromises, he offended the elites on whose co-operation his support ultimately depended. After 1945, when

Li Zongren who officially took over as GMD leader from Chiang Kai-shek in January 1949, but whom Chiang never allowed to exercise full authority. Chiang's refusal to stand down in practice created confusion and uncertainty among the Nationalists and contributed to their increasing difficulties in 1949. (Philip Jowett)

Nationalist PoWs in 1949, including a number of women prisoners. Throughout the civil war, both sides recruited female soldiers, as much for propaganda as for military reasons. The NRA had special 'Dare to Die' units, whose title was meant as an inspiring call to self-sacrifice in Chiang's China. (Philip Jowett)

regaining the provinces the Japanese had occupied, he tried to reimpose GMD control without sufficient thought for the local power structures. The professionals, businessmen, lawyers and financiers who had stayed on to administer the regions during the Japanese war expected to continue after the GMD's return to power. But Chiang, convinced that he could control things without reference to the actual political and social conditions in the provinces, chose to replace them with his own nominees. It was a mistake from which he never recovered.

Denied the loyalty that more understanding policies on his part might have encouraged among the local elites, Chiang was left with only one course of action – coercion. Unable to create a genuine following, he tried to enforce support by terror tactics. This occasionally brought acquiescence, but never real support. Chiang forfeited the goodwill of those sections of the population whose backing his regime most needed. Such failure played into the hands of Mao and the CCP.

The irony was that, for all its association with the moneyed interests of China, Chiang's government had a disastrous economic record. Chiang's 12 years in government after 1937 were dominated by the struggle against Japan and the Communists. This resulted in the bulk of the government's revenue being consumed in military expenditure, which effectively ended any possibility of significant investment in the domestic economy.

The financial policies the GMD was obliged to pursue in its attempt to remain solvent added to the distaste felt towards it. Besides imposing severe taxes on individuals and companies, the government nationalized China's private banks and finance houses. But since the revenue acquired by such means proved insufficient, the government still relied on loans from foreign financiers. Such indebtedness might have been acceptable, even if only grudgingly, to China's bankers had Chiang's government not fallen victim to one of its greatest wartime opponents – inflation.

INFLATION IN CHINA, 1942–48

	Notes issued (in millions of Chinese dollars)	Price index (100 in 1937)
1942	35,100	6,620
1943	75,400	22,800
1944	189,500	75,500
1945	1,031,900	249,100
1946	3,726,100	627,000
1947	33,188,500	10,340,000
1948	374,762,200	287,700,000

What became hyper-inflation progressively undermined Nationalist China, which became a currency speculator's paradise. A mixture of local currencies, sterling and American dollars meant that food prices had no consistent value and varied by as much as 300 per cent between one city and another. As the military situation became desperate from 1948 on, the Nationalists tried frantically to restore financial stability. In an attempt to control inflation, currency values were tied to gold. Strong-arm tactics were employed to force people to exchange their gold, silver and precious stones for a new paper currency, and a show was made of arresting and publicly shaming large-scale speculators. But a system built on deals with racketeers and profiteers could hardly hope to survive by attacking racketeering and profiteering. The currency was too damaged to recover and the newly issued banknotes plunged in value.

In many areas money ceased to have any meaning, and barter became the norm. Rather than embracing progress, China had returned to primitivism. By 1949, financial collapse had led inexorably to social disruption, which could be contained only by repression of a ferocity reminiscent of the excesses perpetrated by the warlords and the Japanese; all this made a mockery of the GMD's claim to bring liberty to the Chinese people.

Economic failure is seldom a sufficient factor in itself to bring down a government. If a regime has enough strength of purpose and military power it can sustain itself. In the end it was the loss of faith among key elements in the GMD that weakened government and party resolve. This decline in morale in turn affected the armed services and prevented Chiang's forces from turning their initial superiority into final victory. Ultimately it was the most obvious of factors in war – military competence – that produced the CCP's triumph in 1949.

Mao described the CCP's victory as having come in three main stages: the CCP's success in holding on to Manchuria, the defeat of the GMD's strongpoint offensive in 1947–48, and the PLA's counter-offensives in 1948–49.

People massing outside the Bank of Central China. Scenes of panic were common as people swamped the banks, trying desperately to convert their paper money into bullion. The government had precipitated the panic by announcing that they intended to prohibit such exchanges. (Cody Images)

The received version of events in Communist China after Mao had come to power was that he had followed a carefully planned path to victory. Never depending on the USSR for support, and overcoming the meddling of the imperialist Americans, he had had the courage and wisdom to strike out on his own. Knowing that the people were the ultimate source of power, he had aroused them in a great crusade against the GMD. The land reforms that had been implemented by the Communists in the liberated areas had shown both the organizing abilities and the generosity of spirit of the CCP. That is why the people had flocked to the Communists' cause, eager recruits more than trebling the size of Mao's armies and making them an unstoppable force that, under Mao's inspired direction, drove the Nationalists from the mainland.

There were elements of truth in this story but much of it was distortion. Mao's genius lay in his opportunism rather than his long-term planning. At the start of the civil war his essential aim was to survive and consolidate in those areas where the CCP had bases. He could not foresee that within three years he would be master of mainland China. It was Chiang's strategic mistakes and political and economic failures that made that possible. The Communists, it has to be said, also suffered from serious defects, which had the GMD been able to exploit

As Communist troops push unopposed from fallen Nanjing toward the defences of Shanghai, crowds jam Shanghai's railway stations to board southbound trains. This shot shows Chinese at a Shanghai terminal buying train tickets for trips into the hinterlands. Air and shipping lines also evacuated residents fleeing to the Nationalist-held south. (© Bettmann/Corbis)

them might have changed the outcome of the war. The CCP's land reform policy may have brought some justice to the countryside by ending landlord exploitation, but its chief purpose was to provide a mechanism for the fierce enforcement of Communist political and social control. Contrary to the CCP's propaganda claim that it was the support of the liberated Chinese peasants that won the war, it is notable that there were few genuine and sustained popular risings in support of the Communists. Fear was a far more potent factor in bringing recruits to the Communist cause than committed enthusiasm. Chiang's tragedy was that he could not turn this fear to his advantage since his own regime was equally repressive.

A critical factor in Mao's triumph was the strength of the political power he had come to exercise within the CCP by 1945. The utter determination with which he prosecuted the civil war once the PLA had gone on the offensive was of a piece with the ruthlessness he had shown in establishing his authority over the CCP. Historians now emphasize his abilities as a military leader, and suggest that of all the factors accounting for the CCP's ultimate victory Mao's generalship was the most significant. It was under him that the Communist forces who were essentially rural guerrilla fighters in 1945 had by 1949 become a modern army capable of conducting a modern war. The most compelling example of this was Mao's willingness to press on with the three massive campaigns of the winter of 1948–49. This was warfare on a scale never previously seen in China. Indeed, such was the scale of the campaigns that some of Mao's commanders doubted that they could be fought successfully. That Mao was able overcome these doubts and drive his armies on to a series of victories that effectively won the war for the CCP illustrates his power of command, and his burning belief in his own judgement.

Mao is perhaps best remembered in history as an extraordinary political figure who, after 1949, re-created China as a nation in his own image. But it must not be forgotten that his control of China was a product of his success in the field. His political ideas were obviously of intrinsic importance, but they would have counted for little had he not won the war. And ideology does not win wars unless it can be translated into realistic and practical action.

Conclusion

Figures of the number of deaths resulting from the Chinese Civil War are imprecise, but all estimates suggest that the carnage was appalling. In the three major campaigns that decided the war, the Nationalists lost over one and a half million men, the Communists approaching a quarter of a million. That total can be doubled for the war overall; some commentators have put the figure as high as six million. This figure includes the Chinese civilians who died from the famine and disruption that accompanied the war or who were the victims of the terror tactics used deliberately by both sides.

It was not the death toll alone that made the legacy of the civil war a bitter one. The struggle enthroned authoritarianism, deified Mao as a supremely wise leader whose word was law, justified fierce 'anti' campaigns against those judged to be dissidents, and made mass mobilization of the peasantry a basic means of social action. It enshrined Marxism-Leninism not because of its quality as a political theory, but because its dogmatism perfectly suited and complemented the traditional Chinese notion that the people's duty was to obey those in power.

The civil war had not been a struggle about principle and ideology, though that was often the language in which it was couched. Instead, it had been a naked struggle for military supremacy. Having achieved power by breaking its military and political adversaries, the CCP under Mao proceeded to establish a new Chinese state whose hallmarks were its readiness to coerce its people into line and to destroy those who opposed its rule. The guiding concept to which Mao adhered was that politics, like war, was a constant conflict. In that regard it was a continuation of the dialectical pattern of Chinese thought. His oft-quoted utterance that 'all power grows out of the barrel of a gun' was for him to be as much a truism in peacetime as it had been in war.

The Chinese Civil War was much more than a parenthesis to the larger Cold War. Indeed, in a negative but critical sense what happened in China between 1946 and 1949 gave shape to the Cold War. Without Mao's victory in 1949, the United States would not have developed its fearful response to what it saw as the creation of a Sino-Soviet Communist monolith. The Soviet Union without China as an ideological ally would have had to be far more circumspect in its approach to international relations, with the result that hostility between East and West would not have intensified in the way that it did. Had China not gone Communist in 1949, there would have been no Korean War in 1950 and almost certainly no Vietnam War in the 1960s.

However, important though Mao's victory was in Cold War terms, its significance goes further. Viewed from an Eastern perspective, the Chinese struggle was of huge consequence to Asia. It led to the creation of modern China – a nation structured on the basis not only of a rejection of many Western values, but also of Communist ones as represented by the Soviet Union. There is also a sense in which the civil war freed China to follow its own path, which is what Mao meant when in 1949 he declared, 'China has stood up.' Achieved in the face of both American and Soviet opposition, the Communist victory over the Nationalists marked a critical stage in the rise of China as a world power, destined possibly to become the most influential force in international affairs in the twenty-first century.

Yet there is a final irony. China became a great power not because of Mao but in spite of him. For all his ability to create a nation

dedicated to a political ideal, the power of China in the twenty-first century rests not on its politics but its economics. There is a sense in which Chiang Kai-shek proved the final victor. He and his successors' development of Taiwan as one of the 'tiger economies' of the second half of the twentieth century became the unacknowledged capitalist model on which Mao's successors, abandoning his dated policies, began to build the truly modern China.

Opposite: Nationalist troops on the island of Quemoy make ready for war during the Second Taiwan Straits Crisis of 1958. Once the Nationalists had taken Taiwan in 1949, the straits between the island and the Chinese mainland became a highly contentious region. For decades there were to be mutual fears of an attack on or from Taiwan. A particularly tense episode occurred in 1958 when Communist armies appeared to be preparing to invade Taiwan. The Taiwanese, backed by the USA, prepared for war against the Communist mainland, and Nationalist-held Quemoy – which lay in the straits – was likely to be the first Communist target. The crisis eventually passed, and it appeared that Mao had been bluffing to test how resolute Chiang and the Americans were. However; international tension over Taiwan remained until the early 1970s when the USA formally recognized Communist China. (Philip Jowett)

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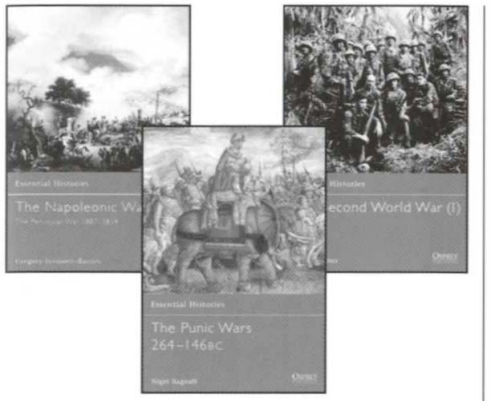

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Above: Communist militiamen photographed in 1945. (Cody Images)

Front cover: A Chinese Communist Party propaganda poster celebrates Mao's taking of the salute in Tiananmen Square after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in October 1949. (The Granger Collection/TopFoto)

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