

# Civil War 1945-1949

## Jiěfàng Zhànzhēng 解放战争

The Chinese Civil War was a competition for power between Chiang Kai-shek's more city-based Nationalist forces and Mao Zedong's more rural Chinese Communist Party. Both sides sought to control and unify China. While Chiang relied on assistance from the United States, Mao won in the end by enlisting the help of China's people, particularly the rural populace.

The Chinese Civil War 解放战争 was rooted in the competition for power between the Nationalist Chinese forces of Chiang Kai-shek 蒋介石 and Mao Zedong's 毛泽东 Chinese Communist Party. Following the defeat of Japan in 1945, the two factions of China's military competed for power for another four years in the Chinese People's War of Liberation 解放战争. The leaders of these two had been chosen by China's first twentieth-century Nationalist leader Sun Yat-sen (孙中山, 1866-1925), but they had become adversaries before and during the fight against Japan. Chiang Kai-shek (蒋介石, 1887-1975) headed the Nationalist Chinese forces (Kuomintang, KMT, 中国国民党), while Mao Zedong (毛泽东, 1893-1976) led the Chinese Communist Party (Zhongguo Gongchandang, CCP, 中国共产党).

### Background of the Conflict

Sun Yat-sen tried to broaden the base of support for his nationalist movement by incorporating the CCP, which

had the support of the Soviet Union. Sun had no intention of compromising his own principles for this support, and his death in 1925 led to a power struggle within the KMT. Because Chiang Kai-shek controlled the military forces, he became its primary leader.

In order to develop the resources necessary to modernize a nationalist China, Sun Yat-sen sent Chiang to Russia in 1923 to observe Soviet methods of discipline and indoctrination; upon Chiang's return in the summer of 1924, Sun had him establish the Whampoa Military Academy 黄埔军校 in Guangzhou. Much like the military leaders in the American Civil War who were trained at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, the leaders of both sides of the Chinese Civil War were trained at the Whampoa Military Academy.

The conflict between the KMT and the CCP began when both sides were attempting to subdue Chinese warlords in northern China (1926-1928) and continued through the Japanese occupation (1932-1945). The need to eliminate the warlords was seen as necessary by both Mao and Chiang, but for different reasons. For Mao, their elimination would end the feudal system in China, helping to prepare the country for socialism and communism. For Chiang, the warlords were a threat to the central government. This fundamental difference in motivation continued throughout the years of fighting against Japanese occupation in China, despite a common enemy.

Mao's Communist forces mobilized the peasantry in rural China against the Japanese, and at the time of the Japanese surrender in 1945 the CCP had raised an army of nearly a million soldiers. The Soviet Union benefited from the pressure Mao's forces placed on the Japanese, and the

CCP forces were supplied by the Soviets. The ideological unity of the CCP, plus the experience gained in fighting the Japanese, prepared it for the next struggle, which would be against the KMT. Although Chiang's forces had been well equipped by the United States, they lacked political unity, effective leadership, and experience.

## Opening Stage of the Civil War, 1945

When the Japanese surrendered in August 1945, Mao and Chiang entered the next phase of their competition. At

that time Mao's forces controlled the northern part of China, while the Nationalists held the territory south of the Yellow River. This gave Mao the capacity to move into Manchuria, but Chiang's KMT had control of the large cities of Nanking 南京 (Nanjing), Shanghai 上海, and Chungking 重庆 (Chongqing).

At the time of Japan's surrender, roughly two million Japanese soldiers were in China. As members of the Allied forces, Chiang's Nationalist forces, the Soviets, and the Americans wanted to disarm the Japanese and to evacuate them in accordance with agreements made at the Potsdam Conference. The situation was complicated when Mao's Red Army refused to follow Chiang's

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The original caption for this photograph read: "Eighty million Chinese Communists who inhabit thousands of square miles of Northern China and are ruled, in spite of the Kuomintang (Government of Free China), by Mao Tse-Tung and his Communist Armies." NATIONAL ARCHIVES.



order directing the Communists to stay away from the Japanese. The American military commander, General Douglas MacArthur, ordered the Japanese to surrender only to Nationalist forces. The Americans assisted the Nationalists by bringing in U.S. Marines to control Peking (Beijing) and Tsingtao (Qingdao), and eventually 53,000 Marines landed in China to assist with the retreat of Japanese forces and to deny the Communists control of major cities. American aircraft also transported over 100,000 Nationalist soldiers to Shanghai, Peking, and Nanking.

The Soviet Army had moved into Manchuria to deal with the Japanese there, but by late 1945 they had planned to withdraw their forces. Chiang feared that this would leave Manchuria open to capture by Mao's Red Army, and requested that Soviet forces delay their withdrawal. Even as the Soviets remained, Red Army forces led by Lin Biao 林彪 established a foothold in the rural areas of Manchuria and waited for the Soviets to leave. By mid-December, Nationalist forces began arriving in Manchuria, assisted by American naval and air forces.

## Attempts at Reconciliation

The United States sent General George C. Marshall to China with the status of "special envoy" to negotiate a ceasefire between the CCP and KMT and to establish a coalition government. In early 1946 Marshall met with Nationalist general Chang Chun 張群 and Communist representative Zhou Enlai 周恩來 to develop plans for an end to the fighting between Nationalist and Communist forces, to establish plans for shared power between the two sides, and for the eventual demobilization of much of the military. While agreements appeared to be progressing well, neither the Nationalists nor the Communists set aside their plans to eliminate the other. General Marshall left China in mid-March to report his progress to President Truman, and within a month full-scale war had broken out between the Nationalists and Communists in Manchuria.

Even as Marshall attempted to restart negotiations, Nationalist and Communist forces continued to fight through the summer in Manchuria. The situation was complicated by the presence of U.S. Marines and naval forces, who were accused by the Communists of fighting alongside the Nationalists.

With no progress being made through his three-man committee, Marshall proposed a new negotiating team that included two members from each side and was headed by the new American ambassador, Dr. Leighton Stuart. This committee failed to end the fighting, and the continued American support of Nationalist military forces convinced the Communists that the U.S. was not neutral in the conflict.

By 1946 Marshall realized that another element of the continuation of the conflict was the fault of Chiang and the Nationalists, especially the extreme right-wing of the party that was headed by Chiang's adopted nephews Chen Li-fu and Chen Kuo-fu. This reactionary wing of the Nationalist Party continued to interfere with attempts at reconciliation, and in January 1947 General Marshall was called back to Washington after his mission to facilitate reconciliation failed.

## The Military Situation in 1946-1947

By the end of 1946 Communist forces controlled nearly three-fourths of Manchurian territory and half of its population. Lin Biao's army of about 300,000 was smaller than the Nationalist forces in the region, but more motivated and highly disciplined. Most of the weapons the Communists had were either taken from the Japanese, or captured from Nationalists. The Communists controlled the rural areas, while the Nationalists held the major cities.

The Nationalist forces in northern China were equipped with American weapons and vehicles, as well as some aircraft. However, in general, Nationalist soldiers were less motivated, and their officers were often corrupt. One particular failing on the part of the Nationalists was that when they surrendered, they turned over their weapons to the Communists rather than destroying them.

In January 1947, Lin Biao led an attack on the Manchurian capital of Changchun 长春 with a force of 60,000 soldiers. Communist forces captured the town initially, but were soon forced out by the Nationalists. After retreating, the Red Army forces moved against Changchun again in February, but were forced back across the Sungari River a second time. A third Communist offensive in March was beaten back by the Nationalists, but the Red Army had succeeded in wearing down the Nationalist forces.

The continuing Red Army attacks forced the Nationalists to abandon the Liaotung Peninsula in May. Nationalist efforts consisted largely of attempts to hold the cities of Mukden (Shenyang, 沈阳), Changchun, and Kirin (Jilin, 吉林) and the rail lines connecting them.

From January to March, at the same time the Red Army was weakening the Nationalist forces in Manchuria, the Nationalists moved on the Communist-held city of Yen'an (Yan'an, 延安), which was defended by a small number of untrained, poorly equipped, Communist forces. When Nationalist forces finally moved into Yen'an in the morning of 19 March 1947, they found that the city was empty. The Communist forces had withdrawn entirely, as was the case with most Nationalist attacks on Communist-held strongholds.

Throughout the Civil War, Chiang's American-trained Nationalist forces expended their efforts on targets which would be found empty. However, in addition to expending resources and time, this placed the Nationalists deep into territory held by the Communists, at risk of becoming encircled by Red Army forces.

Communists in Manchuria in the last half of 1947 also reflected this strategy of encircling the enemy. In September of that year another Communist campaign aimed to isolate Mukden. Because the Communists controlled the countryside and had the support of the rural population, the continued Nationalist control of the cities did not undermine this Communist control. Despite Chiang's declaration in January 1948 that Communist forces had failed in their efforts to encircle Mukden, the real cost for the Nationalists by this time was the loss of half a million men to combat, desertion, or capture in northeast China.

## Ideological Aspects of the Civil War

Throughout the conflict, the Communists used the traditional resentment of peasant farmers toward landowners to their benefit. The KMT were portrayed to Chinese farmers as landlords and warlords, while the Red Army soldiers were seen as commoners.

During the Civil War, CCP forces were required to be more mobile than they had been during the Japanese conflict, and therefore they could not serve as both farmers and soldiers. To meet the need for village organization, the position of village activist was established to

mobilize the masses to support the Communist forces. In 1947 the Land Reform Law authorized the confiscation of land held by the KMT. Also in 1947, as a reflection of this growing power, the Communist forces were renamed the Chinese People's Liberation Army (Zhōngguó Rénmín Jiěfàng Jūn, PLA, 中国人民解放军).

Differences between Communist and Nationalist forces were very clear. Most of the Red Army forces were volunteers from the regions where they fought. Nationalists, on the other hand, had been conscripted into service and were fighting far from their homes, and thus suffered from lack of morale.

Sentiment of the two sides toward the United States was also quite different. Although the Communists were equipped with many American weapons, vehicles, and communication equipment, these had been captured from the Nationalists. The Communists remembered America's support of the Nationalists, the provision of equipment and air transport to Chiang's forces, and General Marshall was portrayed as a conspirator who had supported Nationalist interests rather than as a mediator.

## The Military Situation in 1948

Lin Biao launched another attack on Mukden in January 1948. To emphasize the need to hold this city, Chiang Kai-shek flew to Mukden to direct its defense. Lin was able to stop reinforcement of Mukden by rail, and Chiang was left with only aircraft to resupply Mukden. Lin's Red Army forces gradually took the surrounding cities, essentially leaving Mukden isolated as the only major Nationalist-held region in Manchuria.

American advisors had long advised Chiang to abandon Manchuria to the Communists, but he refused. Although Nationalist forces were better equipped than the Red Army forces opposing them in Manchuria, Chiang's generals seemed only willing to defend their areas of control, and did not attack the Communists.

To the southwest, Communist forces again moved to retake Yen'an, which the Nationalists had given up in April. The Nationalists were able to defeat a Communist offensive in Sichuan Province 四川省 that month, but the Communists still controlled the countryside in Shaanxi 陕西省 and most of the Sichuan Province.

By the spring of 1948 the Nationalists had not only suffered the loss of nearly all of Manchuria, but much of

the territory south of the Yellow River that they had held in 1945. Between March and May of 1948 the city of Luoyang 洛阳 was taken by the Communists, retaken by the Nationalists, and finally retaken by the Communists, who took prisoner some 25,000 Nationalists in mid-May.

By the summer of 1948 the greatest part of the fight between Mao's Communists and Chiang's Nationalists had shifted from Manchuria to central China. The Red Army had steadily grown in size and armaments since 1945, while Nationalist forces had been reduced by about one-third. The Communists were supported by most of the rural population, while the Nationalists were generally disliked by them.

As the number of cities held by the Nationalists decreased during 1948, Chiang became more determined to hold them, a tactic which had been failing since 1945. Chiang's American advisors, headed by General Barr of the Joint U.S. Military Advisory Group (JUSMAG), repeatedly encouraged Chiang to give up cities that could not be held and to concentrate on those which could. Chiang put his faith in his air force's ability to airlift men and equipment where he wanted it. However, one of the last major Nationalist cities, Jinan 济南, fell to the Communists in September when the Communists first seized the city's airfield, then captured the city and the Nationalist garrison there.

The following month Lin Biao again led the Red Army against Nationalist forces in the last holdout cities in Manchuria, capturing land, weapons, and high-ranking officers. Other than Peking and a few cities in the north, this left Chiang with only Xuzhou 徐州, Nanking, Shanghai, and the southern and western parts of China under his control. Again, the Nationalists sought only to defend their territory instead of attacking the Communists, and entire Nationalist divisions defected to the Communist side. The battle for Xuzhou lasted more than two months, and the Nationalist army lost more than a half a million men who were killed, captured, or defected.

## Political Ramifications of the Nationalist Military Defeat

Chiang Kai-shek's military and political failures were due at least in part to his unwillingness to accept the advice of his American advisors. General George Marshall had attempted to resolve the conflict between the Nationalists

and Communists, but had failed largely because of Chiang's intransigence. Similarly, Chiang had rejected the advice of General Barr of JUSMAG. Once his forces at Xuzhou had been defeated, he sent his wife, Madame Chiang Kai-shek, to Washington to make an appeal for more assistance. Arriving in early December 1948, she was coldly received and before the month was over American support for Chiang's government was terminated.

## Final Defeat and Departure

One of the last Nationalist generals to maintain a defense against the advancing Communist forces was General Fu Zuoyi 傅作义, who commanded the railroad corridor connecting Peking with the last of the cities held by the Nationalists. In November and December 1948 Lin Biao led attacks against Fu's forces, and Fu gradually retreated. Rather than engage in a military bombardment of Peking, Fu and Lin agreed to allow the Communist capture of the city. The twenty-five divisions under Fu's command would eventually be absorbed into the People's Liberation Army.

Chiang Kai-shek stepped down as leader of the KMT in January 1949 and was replaced by his vice-president, Li Zongren 李宗仁. Li and Mao entered into negotiations for peace, but Nationalist hardliners rejected Mao's demands. The Communist military capability was a determining factor in resolving the impasse, and when Li sought an additional delay in mid-April 1949, the Red Army crossed the Yangzi (Chang) River. Chiang Kai-shek fled to the island of Formosa (Taiwan, 台湾), where some 300,000 soldiers had already been airlifted. Chiang also relocated his air force in Taiwan and sent the 26 naval vessels of the Nationalist navy there.

The final Communist assault against Nationalist forces began on 20 April 1949 and continued through the summer. By August the Red Army controlled nearly all of mainland China; the Nationalists held only Taiwan and the Pescadores Islands (P'eng-Hu Ch'ün-Tao, 澎湖群島), Guangdong 广东, and a few regions in the far west. From Taiwan, Chiang's air force attempted to bomb the mainland cities of Nanking and Shanghai, but to no effect. Chiang's ground forces attempted a return to the mainland, but without any long-term success, and the last of the Nationalist leadership evacuated the city of Chengdu 成都 on 27 December 1949.

This left Mao Zedong's Communist forces in control of all of China except Hainan Island 海南, Tibet, and Taiwan. The Nationalist forces on Hainan were defeated by Lin Biao's forces in April 1950, and Lin's forces moved into Tibet to control that region as well. In just over five years, the Chinese Communists had defeated a military force supplied and trained by the most powerful government in the world. This demonstrated that the effectiveness of the mass movement centered in the rural population used by Mao was more effective than the Nationalist strategy of controlling population centers.

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### Further Reading

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A governor may commit arson while the governed are not allowed to light a lamp.

只许州官放火，  
不许百姓点灯

Zhī xǔ zhōu guān fang huǒ, bù xǔ bǎi xìng diǎn dēng