

Chinese Civil War (1930s-1940s)

There were forces at work during this period that would eventually undermine the Chiang Kai-shek government. The first was the gradual rise of the Communists.

Mao Zedong, who had become a Marxist at the time of the emergence of the May Fourth Movement (he was working as a librarian at Beijing University), had boundless faith in the revolutionary potential of the peasantry. He advocated that revolution in China focus on them rather than on the urban proletariat, as prescribed by orthodox Marxist-Leninist theoreticians. Despite the failure of the Autumn Harvest Uprising of 1927, Mao continued to work among the peasants of Hunan Province. Without waiting for the sanction of the CCP center, then in [Shanghai](#), he began establishing peasantbased soviets (Communist-run local governments) along the border between Hunan and Jiangxi provinces. In collaboration with [military](#) commander Zhu De (1886-1976), Mao turned the local peasants into a politicized guerrilla force. By the winter of 1927-28, the combined "peasants' and workers'" [army](#) had some 10,000 troops.

Mao's prestige rose steadily after the failure of the Comintern-directed urban insurrections. In late 1931 he was able to proclaim the establishment of the Chinese Soviet Republic under his chairmanship in Ruijin, Jiangxi Province. The Soviet-oriented CCP Political Bureau came to Ruijin at Mao's invitation with the intent of dismantling his apparatus. But, although he had yet to gain membership in the Political Bureau, Mao dominated the proceedings.

In the early 1930s, amid continued Political Bureau opposition to his military and agrarian policies and the deadly annihilation campaigns being waged against the Red Army by Chiang Kai-shek's forces, Mao's control of the Chinese Communist movement increased. The epic Long March of his Red Army and its supporters, which began in October 1934, would ensure his place in history. Forced to evacuate their camps and homes, Communist [soldiers](#) and government and party leaders and functionaries numbering about 100,000 (including only 35

women, the spouses of high leaders) set out on a circuitous retreat of some 12,500 kilometers through 11 provinces, 18 mountain ranges, and 24 rivers in southwest and northwest China. During the Long March, Mao finally gained unchallenged command of the CCP, ousting his rivals and reasserting guerrilla strategy. As a final destination, he selected southern Shaanxi Province, where some 8,000 survivors of the original group from Jiangxi Province (joined by some 22,000 from other areas) arrived in October 1935. The Communists set up their headquarters at Yan'an, where the movement would grow rapidly for the next ten years. Contributing to this growth would be a combination of internal and external circumstances, of which aggression by the Japanese was perhaps the most significant. Conflict with Japan, which would continue from the 1930s to the end of World War II, was the other force (besides the Communists themselves) that would undermine the Nationalist government.

Few Chinese had any illusions about Japanese designs on China. Hungry for raw materials and pressed by a growing population, Japan initiated the seizure of Manchuria in September 1931 and established ex-Qing emperor Puyi as head of the puppet regime of Manchukuo in 1932. The loss of Manchuria, and its vast potential for industrial development and war industries, was a blow to the Nationalist economy. The League of Nations, established at the end of World War I, was unable to act in the face of the Japanese defiance. The Japanese began to push from south of the Great Wall into northern China and into the coastal provinces. Chinese fury against Japan was predictable, but anger was also directed against the Guomindang government, which at the time was more preoccupied with anti-Communist extermination campaigns than with resisting the Japanese invaders. The importance of "internal unity before external danger" was forcefully brought home in December 1936, when Nationalist troops (who had been ousted from Manchuria by the Japanese) mutinied at Xi'an. The mutineers forcibly detained Chiang Kai-shek for several days until he agreed to cease hostilities against the Communist forces in northwest China and to assign Communist units combat duties in designated anti-Japanese front areas.

The Chinese resistance stiffened after July 7, 1937, when a clash occurred between Chinese and Japanese troops outside Beijing (then renamed Beiping) near the Marco Polo Bridge. This skirmish not only marked the beginning of open, though undeclared, war between China and Japan but also hastened the formal announcement of the second Guomindang-CCP [united](#) front against Japan. The collaboration took place with salutary effects for the beleaguered CCP. The distrust between the two parties, however, was scarcely veiled. The uneasy alliance began to break down after late 1938, despite Japan's steady territorial gains in northern China, the coastal regions, and the rich Chang Jiang Valley in central China. After 1940, conflicts between the Nationalists and Communists became more frequent in the areas not under Japanese control. The Communists expanded their influence wherever opportunities presented themselves through mass organizations, administrative reforms, and the land- and tax-reform measures favoring the peasants--while the Nationalists attempted to neutralize the spread of Communist influence.

At Yan'an and elsewhere in the "liberated areas," Mao was able to adapt [Marxism](#)-Leninism to Chinese conditions. He taught party cadres to lead the masses by living and working with them, eating their food, and thinking their thoughts. The Red Army fostered an image of conducting guerrilla warfare in defense of the people. Communist troops adapted to changing wartime conditions and became a seasoned fighting force. Mao also began preparing for the establishment of a new China. In 1940 he outlined the program of the Chinese Communists for an eventual seizure of power. His teachings became the central tenets of the CCP doctrine that came to be formalized as Mao Zedong Thought. With skillful organizational and propaganda work, the Communists increased party membership from 100,000 in 1937 to 1.2 million by 1945.

In 1945 [China](#) emerged from the war nominally a great military power but actually a nation economically prostrate and on the verge of all-out civil war. The economy deteriorated, sapped by the military demands of foreign war and

internal strife, by spiraling inflation, and by Nationalist profiteering, speculation, and hoarding. Starvation came in the wake of the war, and millions were rendered homeless by floods and the unsettled conditions in many parts of the country. The situation was further complicated by an Allied agreement at the Yalta Conference in February 1945 that brought Soviet troops into Manchuria to hasten the termination of war against Japan. Although the Chinese had not been present at Yalta, they had been consulted; they had agreed to have the Soviets enter the war in the belief that the Soviet Union would deal only with the Nationalist government. After the war, the Soviet Union, as part of the Yalta agreement's allowing a Soviet sphere of influence in Manchuria, dismantled and removed more than half the industrial equipment left there by the Japanese. The Soviet presence in northeast China enabled the Communists to move in long enough to arm themselves with the equipment surrendered by the withdrawing Japanese army. The problems of rehabilitating the formerly Japanese-occupied areas and of reconstructing the nation from the ravages of a protracted war were staggering, to say the least.

During World War II, the United States emerged as a major actor in Chinese affairs. As an ally it embarked in late 1941 on a program of massive military and financial aid to the hard-pressed Nationalist government. In January 1943 the United States and Britain led the way in revising their treaties with China, bringing to an end a century of unequal treaty relations. Within a few months, a new agreement was signed between the United States and China for the stationing of American troops in China for the common war effort against Japan. In December 1943 the Chinese exclusion acts of the 1880s and subsequent laws enacted by the United States Congress to restrict Chinese immigration into the United States were repealed.

The wartime policy of the United States was initially to help China become a strong ally and a stabilizing force in postwar East Asia. As the conflict between the Nationalists and the Communists intensified, however, the United States

sought unsuccessfully to reconcile the rival forces for a more effective anti-Japanese war effort. Toward the end of the war, [United States Marines](#) were used to hold Beiping and Tianjin against a possible Soviet incursion, and logistic support was given to Nationalist forces in north and northeast China.

Through the mediatory influence of the United States a military truce was arranged in January 1946, but battles between Nationalists and Communists soon resumed. Realizing that American efforts short of large-scale armed intervention could not stop the war, the United States withdrew the American mission, headed by General George C. Marshall, in early 1947. The civil war, in which the United States aided the Nationalists with massive economic loans but no military support, became more widespread. Battles raged not only for territories but also for the allegiance of cross sections of the population.

Belatedly, the Nationalist government sought to enlist popular support through internal reforms. The effort was in vain, however, because of the rampant corruption in government and the accompanying political and [economic](#) chaos. By late 1948 the Nationalist position was bleak. The demoralized and undisciplined Nationalist troops proved no match for the People's Liberation Army (PLA). The Communists were well established in the north and northeast. Although the Nationalists had an advantage in numbers of men and weapons, controlled a much larger territory and population than their adversaries, and enjoyed considerable international support, they were exhausted by the long war with Japan and the attendant internal responsibilities. In January 1949 Beiping was taken by the Communists without a fight, and its name changed back to [Beijing](#)

. Between April and November, major cities passed from Guomindang to Communist control with minimal resistance. In most cases the surrounding countryside and small towns had come under Communist influence long before the cities. After Chiang Kai-shek and a few hundred thousand Nationalist troops fled from the mainland to the island of Taiwan, there remained only isolated pockets of resistance. In December 1949 Chiang proclaimed Taipei, Taiwan, the temporary capital of China.