

1 The Civil War, 1946–9

Communists and Nationalists

In this chapter you will learn about:

- why the Civil War broke out in China in 1946
- what happened during the Civil War.



Fig. 1 Guomindang soldiers surrender to communist forces during the Civil War



Fig. 2 The situation in China at the end of the Second World War

China is a vast country riven by major cultural and ethnic divisions. The challenge facing both Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Zedong was how to unite this huge territory under their own political system. The struggle to do so would create one of the bloodiest civil wars in history.

Long-term causes of the Civil War

Conflict between Nationalists and Communists



Fig. 3 Dead and wounded Chinese lie in the street after fighting between Guomindang and communist forces in Guangzhou, 1927

The Chinese Civil War, which began in 1946 as a struggle for control of China, had its roots in the conflict between Communists and Nationalists that had begun in 1927. Throughout the years 1927–37, the nationalist government of Chiang Kai-shek had tried to eradicate the Communist Party and impose one-party rule on the whole of China. By 1937, after the episode of the Long March, the Communists were confined largely to the area around Yan'an. The Japanese invasion of parts of China in 1937 led to a temporary cessation of hostilities between the Nationalists and the Communists, who formed a United Front against the invaders. Chiang Kai-shek, however, was still unwilling to accept the Communists as partners in the struggle against the Japanese. In 1941, Chiang's NRA forces launched an attack against communist forces in the south of China, thereby breaching the United Front. Despite this being a military setback for the Communists, politically they gained from this incident. Their propaganda was able to portray Chiang as being more interested in fighting his fellow Chinese and thus dividing the nation, whereas the Communists were able to present themselves as the true Chinese patriots in concentrating on the fight against the Japanese. The stage was set for a full-scale renewal of hostilities between the two forces once the war against Japan was over.

The Second World War in the Far East

For China, the war against Japan began in 1937. For Western powers that had military bases, colonial possessions and economic interests in the Far East, the war began in December 1941 when the Japanese navy launched a surprise attack on the American fleet at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. British bases in Singapore and Hong Kong were attacked and captured soon after.

Cross-reference

The conflict between the Nationalists and the Communists after Chiang Kai-shek's forces had massacred the Communists in Shanghai in 1927, are dealt with in more detail on pages 4–7.

Exploring the detail

Japan's surrender

The Japanese Emperor formally announced the surrender of Japanese forces to the Allies on 15 August 1945, nine days after the dropping of the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima. The actual signing of the Instrument of Surrender took place on 2 September 1945.

Activity

Thinking point

Which of the two sides in China's internal conflict, the Nationalists or the Communists, had gained the most from the war against the Japanese?



Fig. 4 The Guomindang leader, Chiang Kai-shek, with his wife

Key term

Red Army: the army of the Soviet Union. By the end of the Second World War the Red Army was one of the largest land forces in the world.

The entry of the USA and Britain into the war in the Far East in December 1941 provided Chiang's government with much needed foreign allies. The Americans began to supply Chiang's armies with weapons and ammunition, and built airbases on Chinese soil which were used to launch bombing raids on Japan itself. In response, the Japanese started the Ichigo offensive in April 1944, which was aimed at capturing the American bases. This was the first major Japanese ground offensive against nationalist forces in China since 1938. Many of the Chinese forces gave up their positions without a fight, exposing serious problems within the nationalist armies. Morale was low because troops were unpaid, untrained and unskilled, and lacked basic training and equipment. Corrupt officers stole money which was intended for pay and supplies. Chiang did not trust his generals and was constantly interfering in their decisions, even though he was far removed from the action. The result was a major defeat for the nationalist forces and a serious blow to Chiang's prestige.

The end of the war

The Second World War in the Far East ended in August 1945 with the surrender of Japanese forces to the Allies after the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. At the end of the war, Chiang Kai-shek's government in Chongqing was still recognised by foreign powers as the legitimate government of China. The Communists had strengthened their position in Yan'an and had impressed many nationalist-minded Chinese with their energy, determination and discipline in the fight against the Japanese. Given the legacy of nearly 20 years of conflict between the GMD and the CPC, it was likely that the internal struggle would continue once the war was over. In this renewed conflict, however, the odds were stacked heavily in favour of Chiang Kai-shek and his government.

Short-term causes of the Civil War

A divided country

At the end of the war China was once again a divided country. Although Chiang Kai-shek's nationalist government claimed to be the government of the whole of China, it actually controlled only a fraction of the country's territory. As Figure 2 on page 10 shows, the main territorial divisions in China in August 1945 were:

- Japanese forces still occupied the north of China, much of the Chinese coastline and most of the large cities.
- The Nationalists (Guomindang) controlled a large area of southern and central China from their capital city in Chongqing.
- The Communists (CPC) controlled much of the countryside in northern and north-eastern China from their base in Yan'an.
- The Soviet Union's **Red Army** had moved into Manchuria on 8 August 1945.

At the time of the Japanese surrender, Nationalists and Communists tried to occupy as much territory as possible. Both sides were trying to strengthen their position. At this stage, however, the Nationalists had a distinct advantage. Chiang Kai-shek's government was recognised by foreign powers as the legitimate government of China and was

therefore given the right to take the surrender of Japanese forces still based in China. American aircraft airlifted 100,000 nationalist troops to the north so that they could do this, but in doing so they were moving into areas that were under communist control. In response, the Communists began to move into Manchuria, where they received from the Red Army many of the weapons and ammunition captured from the Japanese. There were clashes between communist and nationalist troops in many parts of China.

A legacy of conflict

Years of conflict and rivalry between Nationalists and Communists had left a legacy of mistrust and suspicion. It seemed to many observers at the time that Civil War in China was unavoidable. The aims of the two parties were very different. The Guomindang had close links with business interests and landlords and was in favour of maintaining a capitalist, private enterprise system in China. The Communists aimed for a revolutionary overthrow of the regime followed by the confiscation of large estates from the landlords and of businesses from their private owners. This would prepare the way for a more equal, classless society in which the ownership of land and business would be shared by all. For the Communists, however, these were long-term aims. Few Communists believed that a communist revolution in China was a realistic possibility in the near future. In the short term their aim was to consolidate their position in the areas under their control and to take what opportunities they might find to extend their influence. For tactical reasons, Mao had been prepared to cooperate with the Guomindang in the past and there was a possibility that such cooperation might continue in the future.

Attempts to find a peaceful solution

Both the USA and the Soviet Union wished to avoid a civil war in China so soon after the Second World War. Under American pressure, therefore, Chiang Kai-shek agreed to peace talks with the Communists. On 28 August 1945, the American ambassador to China, Patrick Hurley, personally escorted Mao Zedong to Chongqing for talks with Chiang Kai-shek. Although a ceasefire was supposed to be in operation while the talks progressed, fighting continued in some parts of the country. By October 1945 an agreement was reached in which both sides committed in principle to:

- a democratic political system, with free elections and guarantees of personal freedoms
- a unified military force (i.e. a continuation of the wartime United Front)
- elections for a **national assembly**.

Agreement on these broad, general principles was relatively easy to achieve; much more difficult to resolve were the details over who should control the military forces and local governments in areas under communist control. Mao was not prepared to relinquish communist control on the ground whereas Chiang was determined to extend nationalist control over the whole of the country. Almost immediately after the agreement was signed, therefore, fighting intensified when Chiang sent his forces north into Manchuria. The communist position was severely weakened when Stalin, the Russian leader, ordered the Communists to hand over the cities in Manchuria to the Nationalists.

Activity

Thinking point

Given the ideological differences between the Nationalists and the Communists, and the long history of conflict between the two, was there any realistic prospect of peaceful cooperation between them after the end of the Second World War?

Key term

National assembly: a parliament for the whole of China, based on a democratic franchise.



Fig. 5 Mao Zedong (centre) about to board his plane taking him back to Yan'an in October 1945, after peace talks in Chongqing with Chiang Kai-shek

Exploring the detail

Democratic political systems

A democratic system is one in which power is vested in the people. In practice, this usually means a system in which people have a free vote to choose representatives for a parliament (national assembly), which then has the authority to make laws. In a democratic system, essential personal freedoms, such as the right to free speech, a free press, the freedom to practice a religion and the freedom to set up political parties, are guaranteed by law.

The start of the Civil War

In December 1945, President Truman of the USA sent General George Marshall to China as his envoy on a mission to mediate between the two sides in the conflict. Marshall succeeded in persuading both sides to agree to a ceasefire in January 1946 and pressured Chiang into calling a political conference to discuss the future government of China. The conference, with representatives from all of China's main political parties, succeeded in reaching an outline agreement on a constitution. Once again, however, the agreement fell apart almost as soon as it was signed. When the Guomindang tried to make crucial changes to the terms of the agreement, which would have created an autocratic form of government headed by them, the Communists and other parties withdrew their cooperation. The Nationalists went ahead anyway and drafted a new constitution without the participation of other parties. Marshall made another attempt to mediate by arranging a ceasefire in Manchuria in June 1946, but even as he did so the Guomindang forces were preparing for a major offensive against communist forces in Manchuria, which began in July. At the same time, the Communists seized the key industrial city of Harbin in northern Manchuria and consolidated their control over rural areas. By the late summer of 1946, an all-out civil war had begun in China. The USA's attempts at mediation had failed and Marshall returned home in January 1947.

Key profile

General George Marshall

George Marshall (1880–1959) had supervised the US army and been chief military adviser to President Roosevelt during the Second World War and was described by Churchill as the 'architect of victory'. In December 1945, President Truman sent Marshall to China to mediate between the Nationalists and Communists and to try to persuade both sides to set up a coalition government. His mission was a failure.

A closer look

Mao's attitude towards peace negotiations

Just before Mao went to Chongqing at the end of August 1945 for peace talks with the Guomindang leader Chiang Kai-shek, he outlined his views on the situation in two important documents. The first of these, 'A Declaration on the Current Situation' was a public document issued on 25 August. The following day, Mao issued another document, 'On Peace Negotiations with the Guomindang', which was intended for the eyes of Communist Party members only. Source 1 is adapted from the first, public document.

After the surrender of Japanese imperialism, the important task confronting the whole nation is to consolidate unity in the country, safeguard domestic peace, bring about democracy and improve the people's livelihood so as, on the basis of peace, democracy and unity, to achieve national unification and build a new China, independent, free, prosperous and powerful.

1 Chairman Mao, 25 August 1945. From *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*

Source 2 is adapted from the document issued to Party members only.

The speedy surrender of the Japanese forces has changed the whole situation. Chiang Kai-shek has monopolised the right to accept the surrender, and for the time being the big cities and important lines of communication will not be in our hands. Nevertheless, in northern China we should still fight hard, fight with all our might to take all we can. In the past two weeks our army has recovered 59 cities of various sizes and vast rural areas, thus winning a great victory. In the coming period we should continue the offensive. We should gain control of whatever we can, even though temporarily.

2 Chairman Mao, 26 August 1945. From *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*

Source 3 is also adapted from the document issued to Party members only.

It is possible that after the negotiations the Guomindang may conditionally recognise our Party's status. Our Party too may conditionally recognise the status of the Guomindang. This would bring about a new stage of cooperation between the two parties and of peaceful development. We on our side are prepared to make such concessions as are necessary and as do not damage the fundamental interests of the people. Without such concessions we cannot expose the Guomindang's civil war plot, cannot gain the political initiative, cannot win the sympathy of world public opinion and cannot obtain in exchange legal status for our Party and a state of peace. But there are limits to such concessions; the principle is that they must not damage the fundamental interests of the people.

3 Chairman Mao, 26 August 1945. From *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*

Activity

Source analysis

Study Sources 1, 2 and 3. These sources express Mao's views on the situation facing the Communist Party in August 1945.

- 1 Explain how far Source 2 differs from Source 1 in relation to Mao's approach to the peace talks with the Guomindang.
- 2 The following list contains possible explanations for the differences between Sources 1 and 2. Consider each point in turn and explain why you do or do not accept this explanation.
 - ☐ Mao was indecisive; he could not decide what to do.
 - ☐ Mao was being devious, saying different things to different audiences.
 - ☐ Mao was keeping his options open so that he could decide on his policy as the situation developed.
- 3 In what ways does Source 3 help to explain more fully Mao's attitude towards the peace talks with the Guomindang?

Mao Zedong and the events of the Civil War



Fig. 6 Mao Zedong (right) attends a military strategy conference in December 1946

Phases of the Civil War

Phase 1: early setbacks, July 1946 to May 1947

In the first months of the Civil War the Guomindang, with a larger army and better equipment, took the initiative and forced the Communists on to the defensive. The Guomindang offensive, which began in July 1946, succeeded in capturing control of the large cities and establishing a GMD-controlled 'corridor' along the coast of Manchuria from Jinzhou to Shenyang and on to Changchun. Communist forces in Manchuria were forced to retreat northwards across the Sungari River. Elsewhere in China the Communists were also in retreat. They lost control of their former base in Yan'an from which Lin Biao, one of Mao's most senior and trusted military commanders, had already moved the Communist Eighth Route Army northwards to Manchuria in order to strengthen Communist forces there.

Further south in China there were more reverses for the Communists. They were forced to abandon their isolated positions in the eastern Yangzi River area and, in October, they lost their last remaining city stronghold outside Manchuria at Zhangjiakou. Manchuria was the key battleground in the early stages of the war. Chiang committed over half a million of his best troops to the capture of the region. In October 1946, a renewed offensive by GMD forces against the Communist stronghold of northern Manchuria failed to break the People's Liberation Army (PLA) defences.

From their rural base the Communists adopted an effective guerrilla warfare strategy against the GMD. By ambushing GMD units that ventured outside the cities and blowing up the railway lines on which the GMD's city-based forces depended for their supplies and reinforcements, the PLA and local communist militia forces were able to isolate the

Key term

Eighth Route Army: in 1937, the Communists' Red Army in Yan'an was renamed the Eighth Route Army. In line with the policy of establishing a United Front with the Guomindang, it was placed under the overall command of the Guomindang. At the same time, the remnants of communist guerrilla forces in central China, who had been left behind at the time of the Long March, were reorganised into the Fourth Route Army. Both armies were actually controlled by veteran communist officers who conducted effective guerrilla campaigns against the Japanese.

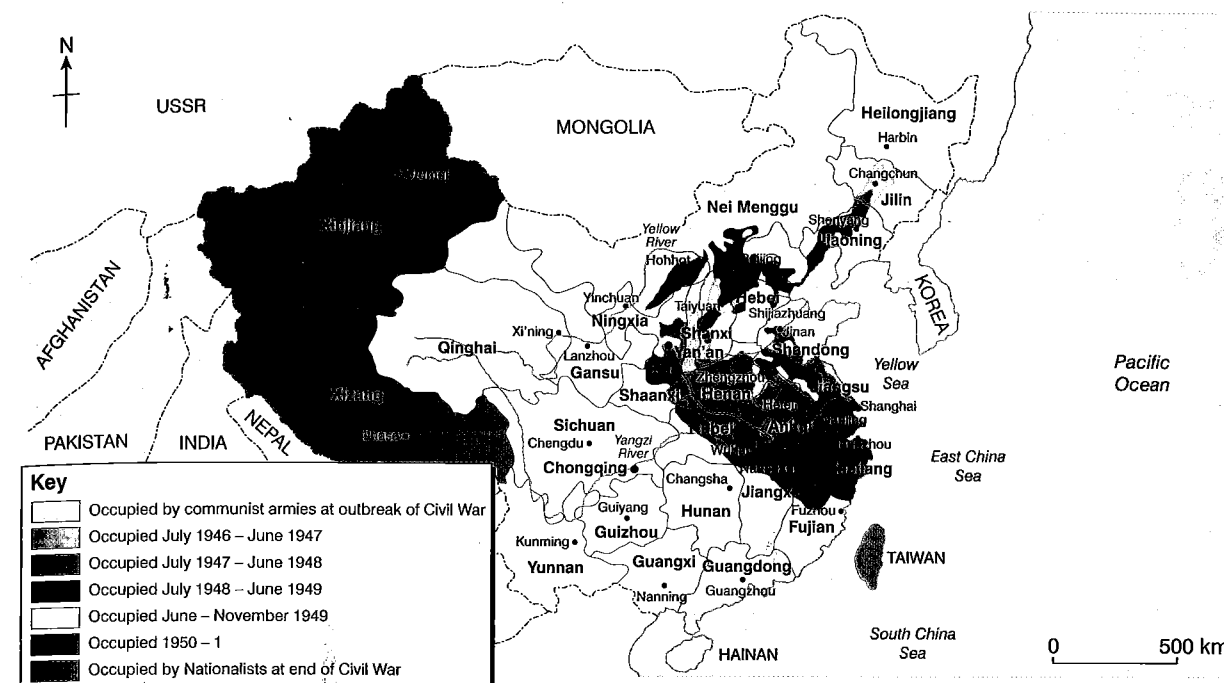


Fig. 7 The communist takeover of China, 1946–51

Nationalists' city strongholds. By the spring of 1947, the Communists' control over northern Manchuria was virtually unshakeable and Lin Biao decided to move on to an offensive strategy.

The military attaché and I approached Tsinan – the capital of Shandong province – flying low over the Tsin-Pu railroad to see how much damage had been done by the Communists. Their guerrilla activities have been especially successful in disrupting railroads, which are essential for the more conventional type of warfare practised by the Nationalists but have little relevance for Communist tactics. The Nationalists have yet to learn this lesson and act accordingly. Although there has been more reconstruction than we had expected, there are long stretches between Taian and Tsinan where even the embankments have vanished.

4

An American observer reports on the war, 1947
From J. F. Melby, *The Mandate of Heaven*, 1968

Key profile

Lin Biao

Lin Biao (1908–71) was the son of a landlord from Hubei province. He graduated from the Whampoa Military Academy in 1925 and quickly established himself as one of the Communist Party's most able military commanders. His talents as a guerrilla leader were put to the test in the Communists' struggle for survival in Jiangxi in the early 1930s and later in Yan'an. During the Civil War, he was the PLA commander in Manchuria and, later, in northern China. He successfully transformed the PLA from a guerrilla force into a modern professional army.

Activity

Thinking point

Using the information in this section, explain why Manchuria was the key battleground in the early stages of the war. You may find it helpful to organise your thoughts under three main headings:

- geographical location
- economic importance
- strategic importance.

Exploring the detail

The start of the Civil War

The Guomindang offensive against communist forces in Manchuria, which began in July 1946, is usually taken to be the start of a full-scale civil war in China. This was not the end, however, of American efforts to bring the two sides together and broker a ceasefire. George Marshall remained in China until January 1947 but President Truman was finally forced to abandon American peacemaking efforts when it became clear that neither side was prepared to be flexible.



Fig. 8 After the PLA's victory in Manchuria in autumn 1948, PLA forces began to move south into northern China. In this photograph, a PLA force is seen marching through the Great Wall at Shanhaiguan

Phase 2: seizing the initiative, May 1947 to November 1948

In May 1947, the PLA launched full-scale assaults on GMD positions but, without an air force to provide support, these first attacks were unsuccessful. Nevertheless, the heavy fighting inflicted serious losses on the GMD forces and sapped the morale of its troops. Throughout the rest of 1947, the Communists maintained their pressure on the Nationalists using guerrilla attacks.

During 1948, the PLA moved from a strategy of mainly guerrilla warfare to one of conventional battles with massed forces of infantry and artillery. In northern China the PLA captured the important city of Luoyang on the Yellow River in April 1948 and began to make significant gains in the province of Shandong, isolating the GMD's main city stronghold of Jinan.

In June 1948, the Communists captured Kaifeng, also on the Yellow River. As the Yellow River valley was a crucial means of access from the coast into the western interior of China, gaining control over these cities meant that the Communists could begin to threaten nationalist control over Xian and Sichuan in the west. The city of Jinan (Shandong province) was captured in September 1948.

There were a series of spectacular communist victories in Manchuria in October and November. On 15 October, the PLA captured the key railway junction at Jinzhou, in many ways the gateway to Manchuria from the rest of China. With Jinzhou in communist hands, the nationalist forces in

Manchuria were now trapped and the PLA was able to pick them off one at a time. The capture of Changchun in October was followed by the fall of Shenyang on 2 November. The loss of Manchuria was a body blow to the Nationalists; over 400,000 troops were lost while the damage to GMD morale was incalculable.

2 November 1948. Shenyang surrendered yesterday and that, I guess, is that. All that is needed now is a few mopping up operations and the sweep to the Yangzi will be complete. Nothing can save Beijing and Tientsin because there is nothing left with which to defend them.

1 December 1948. Hsueh fell today at the end of the biggest pitched battle of the war. Now only Fu Zuoyi [nationalist commander] holds out between Siberia and the Yangzi, and if he holds out or even puts up a fight instead of arranging a deal, it will only prove there is something new under the sun. Nanjing begins to look like a city that was, and night after night the trucks rumble down to the barges on the river as the government continues its move to the south. It is done at night to avoid any possibility of a communist attack by day on the shipping going downstream.

5

*A diary of life during the Civil War.
From J. F. Melby, The Mandate of Heaven, 1968*

Phase 3: the final stages, December 1948 to October 1949

Moving quickly to capitalise on its successes in Manchuria and Shandong, the PLA launched two new offensives in northern China. The first against the vital railway junction of Xuzhou resulted in a battle lasting 65 days in December 1948 and January 1949. With 600,000 troops on each side committed to this battle, both sides recognised its military and its psychological importance. This defeat of the Nationalists was yet another major blow.

The second offensive was directed against Beijing, the old imperial capital. Lin Biao and the PLA moved first against Tianjin to the south of Beijing in January 1949, thereby effectively cutting off Beijing from the rest of China. Beijing itself was captured with little resistance on 31 January. The whole of northern China, including Manchuria, was now under communist control.

In the spring of 1949 there was a lull in the fighting. The PLA rested its troops while consolidating its position in China north of the Yangzi River. A communist-led provisional people's government was set up in northern China.

In April, the PLA returned to the offensive by attacking key cities on the Yangzi River. Nanjing, which had been the nationalist stronghold and capital city of China since 1927, was captured on 23 April and Shanghai, the commercial capital of China, fell to the Communists in late May. The way to the south was now open.

After the capture of Wuhan in May, the PLA forces were divided for the final assault on GMD territory. One force, led by Peng Dehuai, struck westwards from Wuhan towards Xi'an and Lanzhou, both of which were taken in August 1949. Another PLA force led by Lin Biao marched south towards Guangzhou (Canton) which was captured in October, while part of Lin Biao's force was sent south-westwards to mop up the remaining GMD resistance in Guizhou and Chongqing, both of which were taken in November.



Fig. 9 PLA forces march into Nanjing in April 1949

Exploring the detail

Conventional warfare

Modern armies are normally organised and equipped to fight large set-piece battles in which artillery weapons and aircraft are used to bombard the enemy's defences before the main attack begins. The attack by ground forces (infantry, tanks and motorised units) is then launched to capture the enemy's positions and so take control of an area.

Activity

Talking point

Discuss why it was important for the Communists' chances of winning the war to switch from a strategy of guerrilla warfare to one of conventional warfare.

Exploring the detail

Stalin's concerns

In early spring 1949, the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin attempted to persuade Mao to stop the offensive against nationalist forces in the south and establish a communist regime only in the north of China. Stalin was concerned that the Americans might intervene if they believed that Chiang Kai-shek's regime was on the point of final collapse. Mao ignored Stalin's concerns and pushed on to final victory in the whole of China.

Key terms

Politburo: short for political bureau. This group of 14 senior members of the Party, elected by the larger Central Committee, was the Party's major decision-making body. In practice, the smaller Standing Committee of the Politburo made most of the day-to-day decisions.

People's Republic of China (PRC): on 1 October 1949, Mao proclaimed the founding of the People's Republic of China.

Key profile

Peng Dehuai

Peng Dehuai (1898–1974) was a veteran of the Communist Party's struggles during the 1930s, particularly the Long March, and had been a communist commander during the Second World War. He joined the Party **Politburo** in 1945. After 1954 Peng Dehuai became Defence Minister and Commander-in-Chief of the PLA, following his successful command over the Chinese forces during the Korean War (1950–3).

By late September, with most of China under communist control, Mao called a Political Consultative Conference in Beijing. Although dominated by the Communists, there were representatives from 14 other parties at the conference. This conference elected the members of the new central government of the **People's Republic of China (PRC)**, including Mao Zedong as its Chairman. Desperate to avoid capture by the Communists, Chiang Kai-shek fled to the island of Taiwan and established a Guomindang government there.

Activity

Revision exercise

Copy and complete the table below. In the second column list the main battles/events of each phase of the Civil War. In the last column, select one key event for each phase that marked an important turning point in the war and write a short explanation to show why it was important.

	Major events of each phase of the Civil War	Key turning points and their importance
Phase 1		
Phase 2		
Phase 3		

Summary questions

- 1 Explain why civil war was likely by August 1945.
- 2 Explain why civil war broke out in 1946.

War and communist victory

In this chapter you will learn about:

- the political and military strengths of the Communist Party in 1946
- the strengths and weaknesses of the Guomindang in 1946 and the role of Chiang Kai-shek
- the impact on the people of communist discipline and land reforms
- the reasons for communist victory
- the role of Mao Zedong in achieving that victory.

I missed the first contingents of infantry and cavalry, as well as part of the motorised units. But in what I did see, lasting about an hour, I counted over 250 heavy motor vehicles of all kinds – tanks, armoured cars, trucks of soldiers, trucks mounted with machine-guns, trucks towing heavy artillery. Behind them followed innumerable ambulances, jeeps and other smaller vehicles. As probably the greatest demonstration of military might in history, the spectacle was enormously impressive. But what made it especially memorable to Americans was the fact that it was primarily a display of American military equipment, virtually all of it captured or obtained by bribe from Guomindang forces in the short space of two and a half years.

1 *An American observer reports on the PLA's march into Beijing, February 1949*

The political and military strength of the Communist Party in 1946

Table 1 *Estimated strength of nationalist and communist forces in China, August 1945*

	Nationalists	Communists
Troops	2,800,000	320,000
Artillery pieces	6,000	600

Note: These figures are estimates. Other sources give estimates of communist strength at around 800,000 to 900,000 troops in 1945. However, all sources agree that the Communists had far fewer troops than the Nationalists.

Source: J. D. Spence, The Search for Modern China, 1990

Table 1 shows that, at the end of the Second World War, the nationalist forces in China had an overwhelming advantage over the Communists in both numbers of troops and equipment. You should note also that the Nationalists had an air force with aircraft supplied by their American allies whereas the Communists had no aircraft. The communist forces were concentrated in 19 base areas including their main base in Yan'an, over the country as a whole the CPC ruled over some 90 million people in a country of about 600 million. During the course of 1945 and early 1946, nationalist forces drove the Communists out of most of their base areas. From a military point of view, therefore, it appeared that the Nationalists had the best chance of winning the Civil War. There were, however, a number of political and military factors that strengthened the Communists' position.



Fig. 1 *Mao Zedong (left) and other leading communists at the Seventh Party Congress of the CPC in 1945*