

Chiang Kaishek was slow to respond to the Japanese action. The CCP exploited this by asserting that they, not the Nationalists, were the true defenders of China against the Japanese. The Communists both exaggerated their own contribution to China's anti-Japanese struggle and understated that of the Nationalists, who did the bulk of the fighting. Nevertheless, since Chiang's primary aim throughout was to crush the Communists, it appeared that he was not fully committed in his resistance to Japan. Ironically, as Mao later admitted, the Japanese occupation was the saving of the Chinese Communists. The Japanese, by diverting Chiang away from his main objective of destroying the CCP's bases, unwittingly enabled the Communists to survive.

The Chinese Civil War, 1945–49

The defeat of Japan at the end of the Second World War in 1945 was followed by the renewal of open hostilities between Mao's CCP and Chiang's GMD. Over the next four years a bitter civil war was fought, involving the death of 6 million soldiers. How effectively the Red Army had developed as a fighting force under Mao was revealed by its ultimate victory. 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 that later date, their grip on northern, central and southern China had been broken in a series of victorious **PLA** campaigns.

Late in 1949, Chiang fled with the remnants of his forces to the island of Taiwan (Formosa) where he began to establish a separate Chinese state. 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).

A set of specific Nationalist weaknesses and Communist strengths explain Mao's success.

Nationalist weaknesses

It was Chiang Kaishek himself who in the last months of the war listed five basic reasons why his forces had lost:

- Lack of skill and judgement of his military commanders, who fought 'muddle-headed battles'. They planned poorly and issued orders irresponsibly.
- Lack of training of the rank-and-file soldiers, who were incompetently led by their officers.
- Low Nationalist morale. This was a result of the complacency among the high-level officers, many of whom were concerned solely with their own self-interest. (It should be added that the Nationalist recruitment methods were so harsh that the conscript Nationalist armies lacked spirit and purpose.)

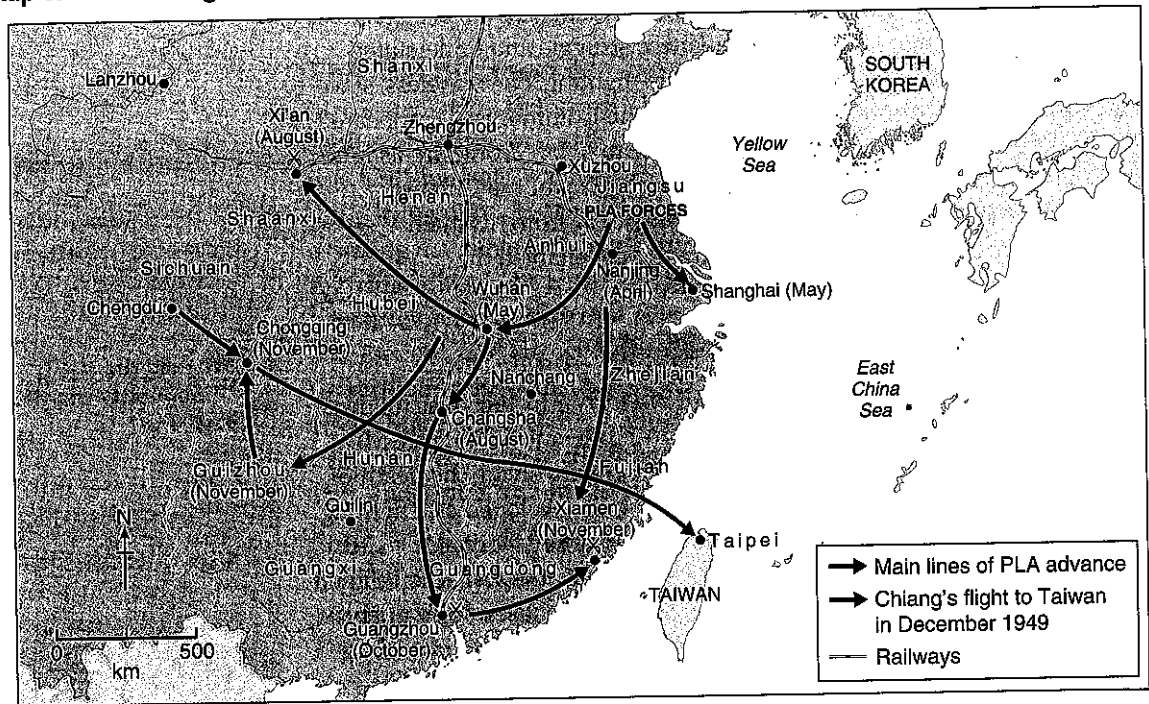
← Why did the Communists win the Civil War?

KEY TERM

PLA China's People's Liberation Army, formerly the Red Army.

SOURCE D

Map of the final stages of the Chinese Civil War, 1946–49.



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Study Source D. What information does it contain regarding the last stages of the Civil War?

- The GMD was unable to inspire the forces in the field because as an organization it lacked discipline and effective propaganda, attributes in which Mao and the Communists excelled.
- The Nationalists' failure to make effective use of the arms and resources with which they were provided by the USA. Too often the weapons fell into Communist hands.

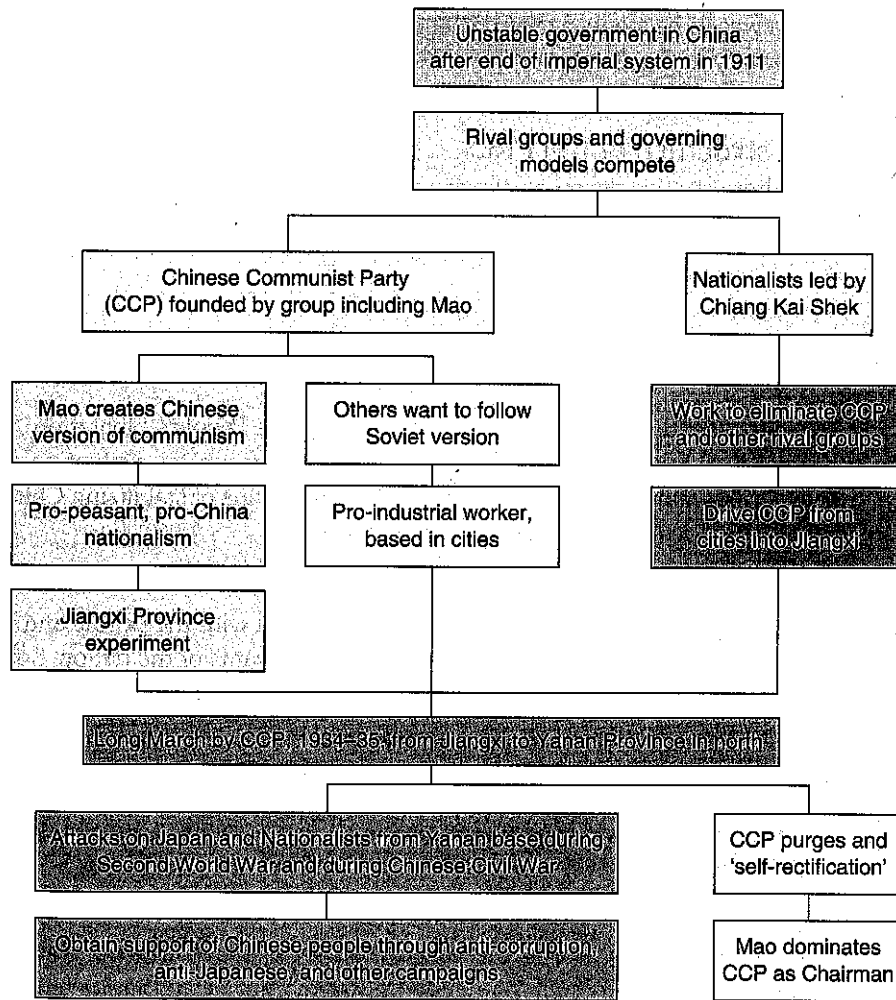
To Chiang's list could be added the Nationalists' general unpopularity among ordinary Chinese people, which made it difficult for Chiang's forces to control regions except by severe repression, which was invariably counter-productive.

Communist strengths

The Communists' success was attributable to a number of reasons:

- Mao's mixture of determination and opportunism served the Communists well. When the war began Mao's main aim was simply to avoid defeat by preserving his northern bases but when he realized that the Nationalists could be beaten he adopted an attacking strategy which eventually forced Chiang out of mainland China.
- Historians now suggest that, of all the factors accounting for the CCP's ultimate victory, Mao's military leadership was the most significant. It was under him that the Communist forces who were essentially rural guerrilla fighters in 1945 had by 1949 become an effective modern army.

- A key element was Mao's self-confidence and power of command in pressing on with three decisive campaigns in the winter of 1948-49, even when his generals doubted that they could be fought successfully.
- The Red Army's ability to live off the land and obtain support, food and information from people in the localities was a huge advantage.
- Although Stalin gave some military support to the Communists, he did not want a strong united China as a neighbour, and attempted to pressure Mao into making a compromise peace with Chiang which would have left China partitioned. Mao, intent on complete victory, successfully resisted such interference.



SUMMARY DIAGRAM

Mao's rise to power, 1911-49