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978-1-107-05467-7 - China's Civil War: A Social History, 1945–1949

Diana Lary

Excerpt

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Introduction

戰亂

Zhanluan

The chaos of war

The chaos of war is a visitation that China has endured many times, chaos created either by the invasion of outsiders or, even worse, by civil war. Between 1945 and 1949 one of the most bitter civil wars in China's long history was fought across the country. The outcome, the victory of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), changed China forever. The incoming state was determined on revolution, on a complete transformation of the state and society. The arrival of the CCP also created a huge upheaval in global politics; communism was established in the world's most populous country.

The Civil War is still not formally over. The two sides in the war remain technically at war. The People's Republic of China (PRC) government in Beijing rules over all of Mainland China, but the Republic of China, now in its 103rd year, is still firmly in existence in Taiwan. The PRC government calls Taiwan a 'renegade province', but that rather threatening term does not alter the reality of two separate Chinese polities, two polities still firmly tied together by their common history and culture, and by the legacy of the tragedies of modern history. The most difficult and painful part of the common history is the history of the Civil War.

Civil war is the most horrible form of war. It has a hideous intimacy to it that inter-state wars do not. Those who are killed, ruined or exiled during a civil war are the victims of their own compatriots. People connected to each other by history and nationality turn against each other, driven by divisions that transcend their attachment to the nation. The basis for these divisions varies. In the Russian Civil War (1917–1922) the divides were class and ideology, between those who opposed the tsarist autocracy and those who were loyal to it. In the Rwandan Civil War (1990–1994) the division was ethnicity, between the Hutu and Tutsi,

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two distinct groups who were manipulated into murderous hostility. The divide may be religion, as it was in the long-running conflict between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland. Civil war may be the outcome of recurrent struggles between political factions, breaking out when one or other of equally matched factions take their turn in a 'regular massacre of compatriots', as has happened with dismal regularity in the history of Colombia.¹

Civil war often follows on the heels of an inter-state war that has weakened the existing regime. In Russia, the Civil War started in the chaos of the last year of the First World War, when soldiers of the tsarist armies were no longer willing to risk their lives for the regime, and 'voted with their feet' – i.e., left the battle fronts and precipitated a civil war that had been brewing for some time. In Vietnam, the communist Vietcong's fight against first France and then the USA was a civil war embedded in an international war, in which parts of Vietnamese society fought with the foreign powers.

China has her own particular pattern of civil war, a very long one. The war between Xiang Yu and Liu Bang in the third century BCE (206–202) came only 15 years after the Chinese state was unified by Qin Shihuang. The war is one of the most celebrated conflicts in all of Chinese history, a war in which the brutal, crude Liu Bang, from north China, defeated a man of culture and refinement, Xiang Yu, from the south.² Liu's victory brought about the establishment of one of China's most glorious dynasties, the Han; Liu Bang made himself the first emperor, Han Gaozu.

Over China's history there has been a sickening sense of inevitability to civil war, as an unavoidable stage in the dynastic cycle, the path followed by many of the imperial dynasties. Civil wars were triggered as a dynasty went into decline, nearing the end of the cycle. The start of civil war, often a peasant rising, was a sign that the ruling dynasty had lost the mandate of heaven, and was no longer able to hold the state together, or to keep control of the divisive elements within the vast state. A recent civil war between the Confucian order and new political forces was the Taiping Rising (1850–1864), in which a huge movement under the banner of a Chinese form of Christianity took over much of southern and central China. The Qing Dynasty managed to quell the rising, with great savagery, but the dynasty was critically weakened and its days were numbered. It fell less than 50 years later, in 1911.

¹ Juan Gabriel Gasquest, *The Secret History of Costaguana* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), p. 64.

² Xiang Yu is an enormously popular cultural icon. One of the best-known Peking operas *Bawang bieji* (*The Autocrat Bids Farewell to his Concubine*) tells his story. A film based on the opera, *Farewell My Concubine* (director Chen Kaige), came out in 1993.

During the two decades after the establishment of the Republic in 1912, China was divided into a patchwork of military satraps, under an assortment of military figures known collectively as the warlords. This was a form of disseminated militarism rather than a full-scale civil war. Some parts of China were fought over frequently, others were untouched. There was no question of ideology, only of control. In 1928 a powerful nationalist movement, the Guomindang (GMD), unified the country. It set up its capital in Nanjing, the southern capital, to distinguish the new government from the old imperial regime whose capital was in Beijing, the northern capital. The unification was only partial; there were still large areas under the control of militarists – and there was a small but tenacious communist movement, named by the GMD as an insurgency led by the CCP, which *did* see itself as involved in a civil war, a fight for a socialist China.

Chinese civil wars have had two critical elements. The first element is the regional divide, between the north and the south. The conquests that accompanied dynastic change in China usually showed a marked distinction between north and south. In civil war the two sides often distilled out along the regional divide. In the Taiping Rising the movement moved rapidly from south to north. In the communist conquest in 1949 the north triumphed over the south, as Liu Bang had triumphed over Xiang Yu. The second common element to civil wars in China is the urban/rural divide. Many of the dynastic changes in China's history were sparked by peasant rebellions. The CCP conquered China by, in its own words, 'surrounding the cities with countryside'; the party was brought to power by peasants and peasant armies.

农村包围城市

Nongcun baowei chengshi

The countryside surrounds the cities

By contrast Chinese civil wars have lacked two of the most common elements of civil wars elsewhere – religious conflict and ethnic hostility. Ethnic hostility has shown itself in the incursions of the Han state into the borderlands, but seldom within China itself. What is shared by civil wars in China with civil wars in other countries is the tremendous human cost. These costs are measured in terms of death, disruption, exile and bitter, lasting divisions that continue over generations. During the Russian Civil War close to a million soldiers on both sides died; a much larger number of civilians, possibly eight million, died as direct and indirect results of the war. More than two million people, later known as White Russians, fled from the new Soviet state in the immediate aftermath of the war; a large number of them went across Siberia

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into China.³ The deaths and the exiles from the Chinese Civil War between 1945 and 1949 surpassed the number in Russia. The losses were less catastrophic, however, in proportion to population, than the deaths in the Vietnam War, in which more than a million soldiers died, and perhaps half a million civilians, out of a population of less than 50 million.

The deaths and exiles are the most easily measureable part of the cost of civil war. Other costs are real but less amenable to cold statistical measurement. Civil war leaves behind profoundly damaged societies, and a legacy of grief and injury that the passage of time cannot heal completely.

The long Civil War

The 1945–1949 Civil War was the last stage of a conflict that had been going on for almost two decades, between the GMD and the CCP. The start of the long Civil War can be dated precisely to April 1927. In the early 1920s the GMD and the CCP were closely linked by a formal alliance, the First United Front, and through the personal ties between the youthful leaders, who had trained together in Guangdong. Both parties considered themselves revolutionary, both shared the goal of uniting and then transforming China. The major difference between them was ideology. The GMD's ideology was the rather general *Sanmin zhuyi* (*Three Principles of the People*), the thinking of the revolutionary leader Sun Yat-sen, which was designed to encompass as many people as possible, and would now be called 'big-tent' thinking. The CCP ascribed to a tougher, universalist and highly evolved political theory, Marxism-Leninism, which was based on the conviction that the victory of socialism was inevitable, and that 'all revolutionary wars are just'.⁴

The two parties fought the first half of the Northern Expedition together (1926–1928), with a shared aim to put an end to warlordism and re-establish China's international status. Then in April 1927 came what the GMD called the 'great cleansing' (*qingdang*), what the CCP called the 'counter-revolution'. The much more powerful partner in the United Front, the GMD, launched a sudden and deadly attack on the CCP, intent on eradicating the party and its members. The White Terror in the late spring and early summer of 1927 took the lives of thousands

³ Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy: A History of the Russian Revolution* (New York: Viking, 1996), p. 774.

⁴ Mao Zedong, 'Problems of Strategy in China's Revolutionary War' (December 1936) *Marxists Internet Archive*, I.

of communists; only a handful managed to escape. The extermination campaign was run by a man whom foreigners in China had labelled until then as a ‘Red’, Chiang Kai-shek.

The 1927 purge virtually destroyed the CCP, a literal decimation. It left lasting personal bitterness and a total distrust of the GMD that could never be altered. The tiny rump of communists who survived withdrew into a few bases across the country, all in remote fastnesses in the border regions between provinces. These survivors were condemned to isolation, completely cut off from their previous lives and from their families. There was no going back to their previous lives; only death awaited them. They had to live with the knowledge that their family members were in danger because of them, hunted down and often killed. Mao Zedong’s second wife, Yang Kaihui, was killed in 1930. Years later he commemorated her in one of his most famous poems.

Mao Zedong’s poem

This poem was written in 1957, as an epitaph for Liu Zhixun, sent to his widow. The surname Liu means willow. The poplar (Yang means poplar) is Mao’s much-loved second wife, Yang Kaihui, who was killed by Guomindang forces early in the revolution.

我失骄杨君失柳，
 杨柳轻扬直上重霄九。
 问讯吴刚何所有，
 吴刚捧出桂花酒。
 寂寞嫦娥舒广袖，
 万里长空且为忠魂舞。
 忽报人间曾伏虎，
 泪飞顿作倾盆雨。
 I lost my proud poplar, you lost your willow.
 The poplar and willow have ascended to the Ninth Heaven.
 Wu Gang is asked what he can offer,
 And serves them laurel wine.
 The solitary moon goddess spreads her broad sleeves
 To dance in boundless space for these loyal souls.
 On earth there is a sudden report that tigers have been subdued,
 Tears fly and fall as mighty rain.

The purge seemed to be the end of communism in China. It was not. The CCP survived, although always under threat of destruction. In the early 1930s its bases were battered and almost destroyed in a series of encirclement campaigns that the GMD government launched against

them. In 1934 the Central Soviet base in Jiangxi was abandoned and the CCP was forced on to the Long March, an epic withdrawal that took the CCP to safety in the remote northwest – and also created a potent myth of survival.

A far greater threat to China than the CCP was on the horizon. Japan took advantage of China's internal struggles to encroach on Chinese territory. The Japanese threat became so severe that one of Chiang Kai-shek's own military allies, Zhang Xueliang, kidnapped him in late 1936, in the ancient capital of Xi'an, to force him to make a stand against Japan. To get his release Chiang had to agree to the Second United Front with the CCP, to resist Japan. Chiang could not forgive the humiliation of being kidnapped (in his nightshirt). He kept his kidnapper Zhang Xueliang under house arrest for the rest of his own life. Zhang was released only after Chiang's death (1975).

Names of a war

The warfare that engulfed China from 1937 to 1945 has been given a variety of names. In Chinese, on the Mainland and in Taiwan, the 1937–1945 war is known as the *KangRi zhanzheng*, the War of Resistance to Japan, shortened to *Kangzhan*, Resistance War. In Japan and in the West the war is now often called by the less emotive name, the Second Sino-Japanese War. The First Sino-Japanese War was that of 1894–1895, known in Chinese as the *Jiawu zhanzheng*, for the year name in the traditional Chinese dating cycle. In a wider context the 1937–1945 war is often conflated with the global conflict, the Second World War (1939–1945). The Second World War itself is problematic. It started in Europe, and for countries closely allied to Britain, in 1939. The USA did not enter the war until the end of 1941.

The full-scale Japanese invasion of China in July 1937 triggered the Resistance War, which lasted for eight long years. At the beginning of that war there seemed to be some rapprochement between the GMD and CCP, but it was not a happy alliance. The CCP hated and distrusted the GMD, while the GMD, much more powerful than the CCP, was deeply hostile to a party it had been fighting so long. By the middle of the war it was clear that the rapprochement had been only a hiatus in the unchanged hostility. By 1945, after the Japanese surrender, the hostility flared back up in its full virulence. There was a major rider: the balance between the two parties had shifted dramatically.

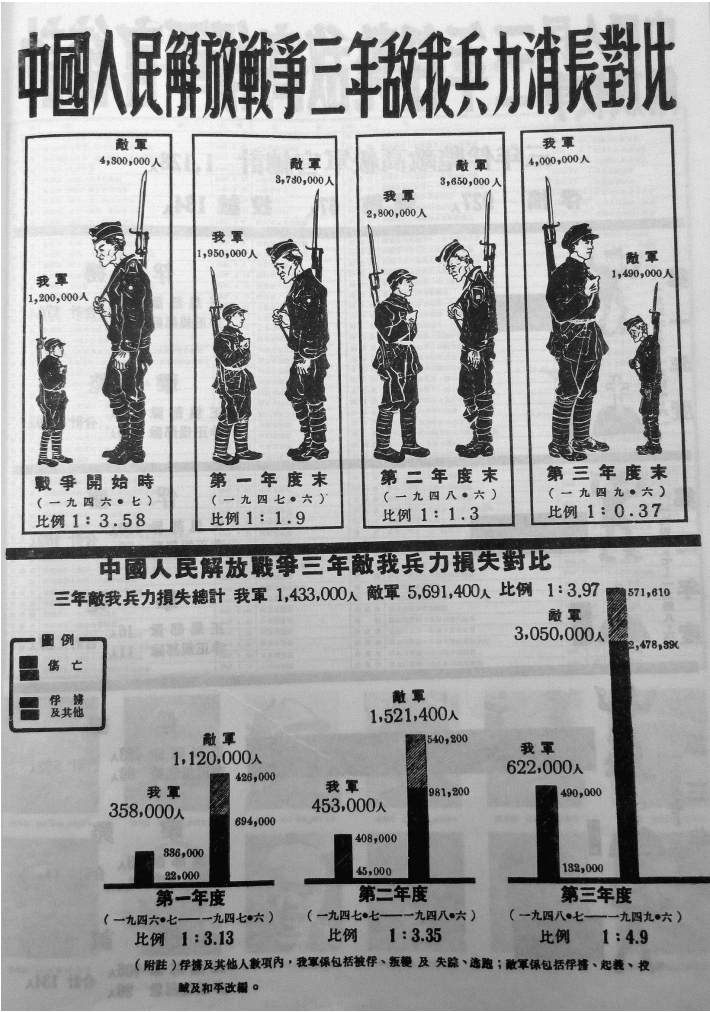


Fig. 1 Comparative military strengths

The course of the eight-year Resistance War, which damaged the GMD far more than it did the CCP, meant that at its end the CCP was strong enough to take on the GMD. In 1972 Mao Zedong thanked the then Japanese prime minister Tanaka Kakui for helping the CCP to power. Japan had fought the war under the pretext of containing communism. Instead, the brutal treatment of much of the population of the occupied areas pushed people, especially peasants, into the arms

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of a party committed to resistance to Japan – the CCP and its guerilla fighters. Chalmers Johnson argues persuasively that the alliance between Party and peasantry in the resistance to Japan brought nationalism to the villages, taught peasants to understand how oppressed they were under the old order and gave them a sense of belonging to a nation.⁵ The wartime mobilisation of the peasants was the beginning of the process of ‘surrounding the cities (the GMD) with the countryside (the CCP)’.

The four-year Civil War, 1945–1949

The acute, four-year Civil War started at the end of a long global war, World War Two (1939–1945). Asia was in chaos. Colonialism was dying. Countries were suddenly liberated from Japanese colonialism (Korea, Taiwan) or occupation (China, Southeast Asia). Some countries were still technically colonies but the colonial masters, the British, French and Dutch, were incapable of resuming their old colonial rule given the ravages of the war in Europe as well as Asia and the nationalist movements in the colonies. The USA was the new superpower, in charge of the occupation administration of Japan, and involved in other places, including China, in preventing nascent conflicts from flaring up. The USSR had suffered greater damage from the Second World War than any other state, and was in recovery, but flexing its muscle in a mood of revenge and of promoting the spread of communism.

The Civil War that started even before the Resistance War was over was, in a formal sense, an ideological war, fought between two radically different worldviews. Both the GMD and the CCP saw themselves as representing the true China. Each side called the other ‘bandit’: the CCP called the GMD *guofei*, the GMD called the CCP *gongfei*. Neither called the war a civil war. For the CCP the war was fought for socialism and revolution, and so was called the War of Liberation (*Jiefang zhanzheng*). For the GMD the war was fought against communism and the spread of Soviet influence; it was a war of counter-insurgency. For the CCP the war brought the glorious Liberation of China. For GMD the war brought either the ‘strategic withdrawal (*chetui*)’, or the ‘occupation by the enemy (*lunxian*)’ of Mainland China. The war was a foreign-directed catastrophe; *Soviet Russia in China* was the title of Chiang Kai-shek’s later apologia.⁶

⁵ Chalmers Johnson, *Peasant Nationalism and Communist Power: The Emergence of Revolutionary China, 1937–1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1963), pp. i, 19, 31.

⁶ Chiang Kai-shek, *Soviet Russia in China* (New York: Farrar, 1957).

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The GMD fought the Civil War in a state of ideological confusion and decline, no longer certain about its own beliefs after the terrible losses of the Resistance War. Its leaders were fearful for the future, anguished and bitter about what might have been – the society they believed they were on the way to creating before 1937. The CCP fought the war detesting the past and longing for a new world, their ideological hatred of the old society coupled with bitterness over their own failures and humiliation between 1927 and 1937. In the Civil War the CCP conveyed a strong sense of renewal and redemption that was profoundly moving especially to young people who had grown up during China's darkest days and saw around them older people who were defeated, cynical or corrupt.

There is an irony to the ideological conflict. The outcome of the war was decided not in an ideological struggle, but by soldiers on the battlefields, where the CCP's army, the People's Liberation Army, won. Neither side has ever formally recognised that ideological issues were actually less important in the course of the war than were military ones. Ideology still had a key role, but it was less the victory of a formal ideology, Marxism-Leninism, than it was the winning over of popular support. Beyond the fighting on the battlefields was a propaganda struggle for the hearts and minds of key elements of the Chinese population, a battle that the CCP won.

Both the GMD and CCP had their own internecine quarrels to deal with while they fought each other. Chiang Kai-shek distrusted most of the GMD's senior military figures and spurned many political figures. The only people he trusted belonged to a small coterie with tight personal connections to himself, men who had studied under him at the Whampoa Military Academy. In the CCP Mao's harshness in dealing with his political opponents during the Yan'an period had succeeded in entrenching his tight control over the party. His harshness was slightly less in evidence in dealing with his generals, in whom he seems to have had enough confidence to allow them to argue with him with relative impunity.

Between those Chinese loyal to the GMD and those supporting the CCP was a vast space. At the start of the Civil War the two sides together commanded the loyalty of only a small proportion of Chinese; the mass of people were caught in the space between the two sides. Those who were aware of what was happening in the war looked on in anxiety, tinged by hope or fear, of what was to come. Older people thought with nostalgia for the past that seemed to be lost forever. Most people simply longed for stability, even a harsh one.

The polarisation between the GMD and the CCP can be seen as a wilful failure to find a peaceful solution to their mutual animosity. This

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was General George Marshall's view, as he presided over negotiations to prevent civil war. The insanity of starting a civil war after eight years of invasion was hard for outsiders to grasp but, even though both sides took part in negotiations to stop the war, both sides actually wanted war. The two leaders were implacably determined to fight.

Marshall mission

President Harry Truman sent General George Marshall, the only five-star general in the US Army, to China to prevent the outbreak of civil war. The mission lasted just over a year, from December 1945 to January 1947. It ended in failure, even though Marshall was able to impose a ceasefire early in the civil war (June 1946). The reasons for the failure have been discussed at enormous length. Marshall's insistence on a ceasefire, when the GMD seemed close to defeating the CCP in Manchuria, prompted Joseph McCarthy to label him pro-communist during the anti-communist witch hunts in America in the early 1950s. The probable reason for the failure is more prosaic: China was not America's to lose. Marshall laboured hard and sincerely to prevent a war that was inevitable because the two parties wanted it so badly. Marshall returned to Washington, became secretary of state and presided over a much more rewarding project, the Marshall Plan to restore Europe's economy.

Some of the savagery and extremism of the Civil War can be attributed to the huge egos of the leaders on either side. Both Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Zedong showed megalomaniac tendencies, in the long Chinese tradition of powerful, ruthless leaders, *barwang*, dictators or autocrats. The most famous of the *barwang* was Qin Shihuang, the first emperor of China, the ruthless man who burned books and killed scholars – but still united the state. The megalomaniac tendencies manifested themselves in an inability to trust others, or to share control, and a reliance on harsh tactics to ensure their rule. With two such individuals at the top of the opposing parties, the room for mediation or for compromise was next to nothing. Part of the tragedy of the Civil War is that it was fought under the leadership of two men whose personal ambitions drove them to seek victory at all costs – regardless of the havoc and death that would come in the process.

Until now, the Civil War has been difficult to discuss or write about. For most Chinese the war still seems too painful and too confusing to